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Montreal Review of Books

is published by the Association of English-language
Publishers of Quebec (AELAQ).
Circulation: 34,000

Malcolm Fraser • Editor

Priscilla Jolly • Associate Editor

Rebecca West • Publisher

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ISSN # 1480-2538

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Dépôt légal, Bibliothèque nationale du Québec
and the National Library of Canada,
first quarter, 2026.

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

One-year subscriptions available for \$15
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Cover art by Allen's Cruz, graphic and type designer
based in Montreal. Reinterpretation of 1967 cover for
Sexus found in Matthew Purvis, *The Pornographic
Delicatessen* (Concordia University Press, 2025),
141, fig. 4.9. allenscruz.ca

PRINTED IN CANADA

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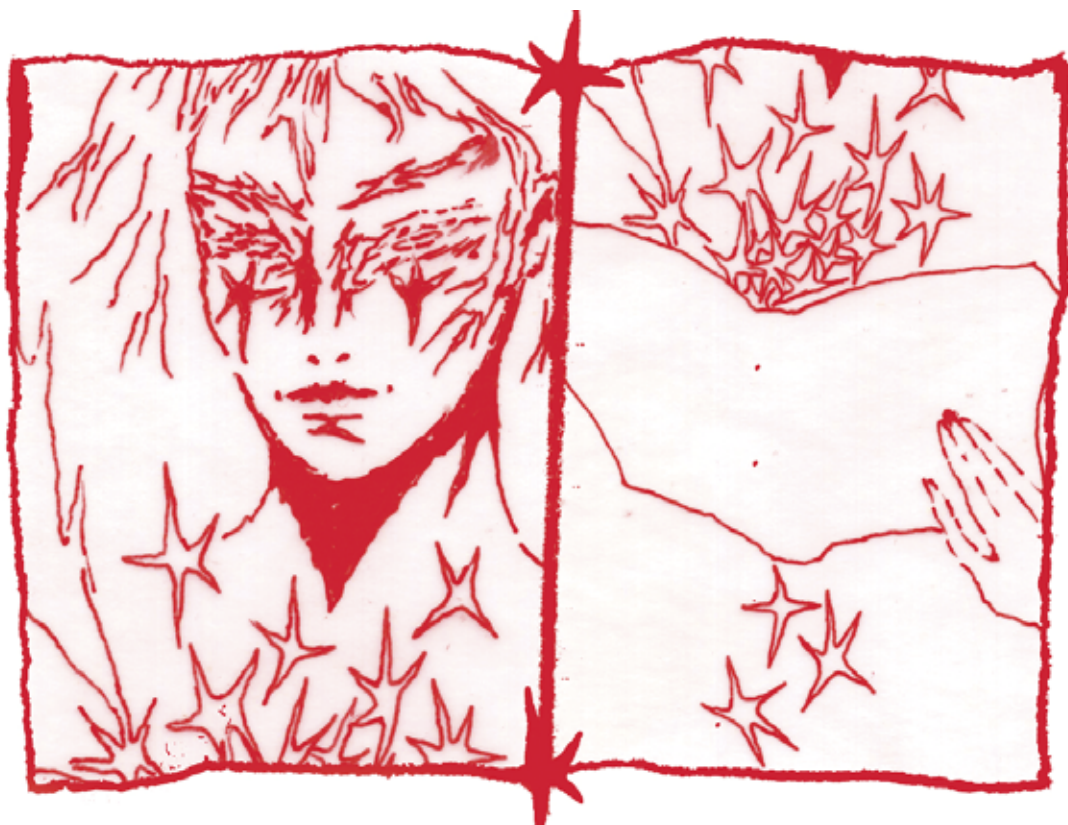
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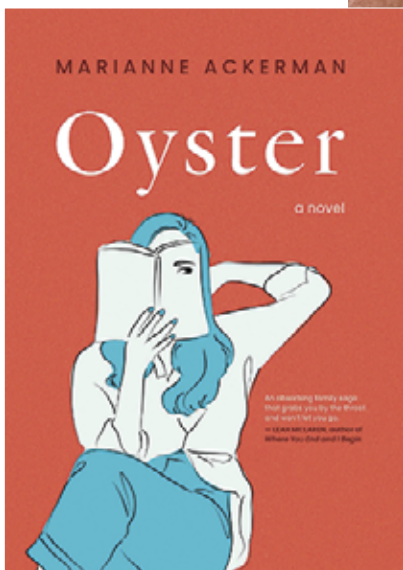
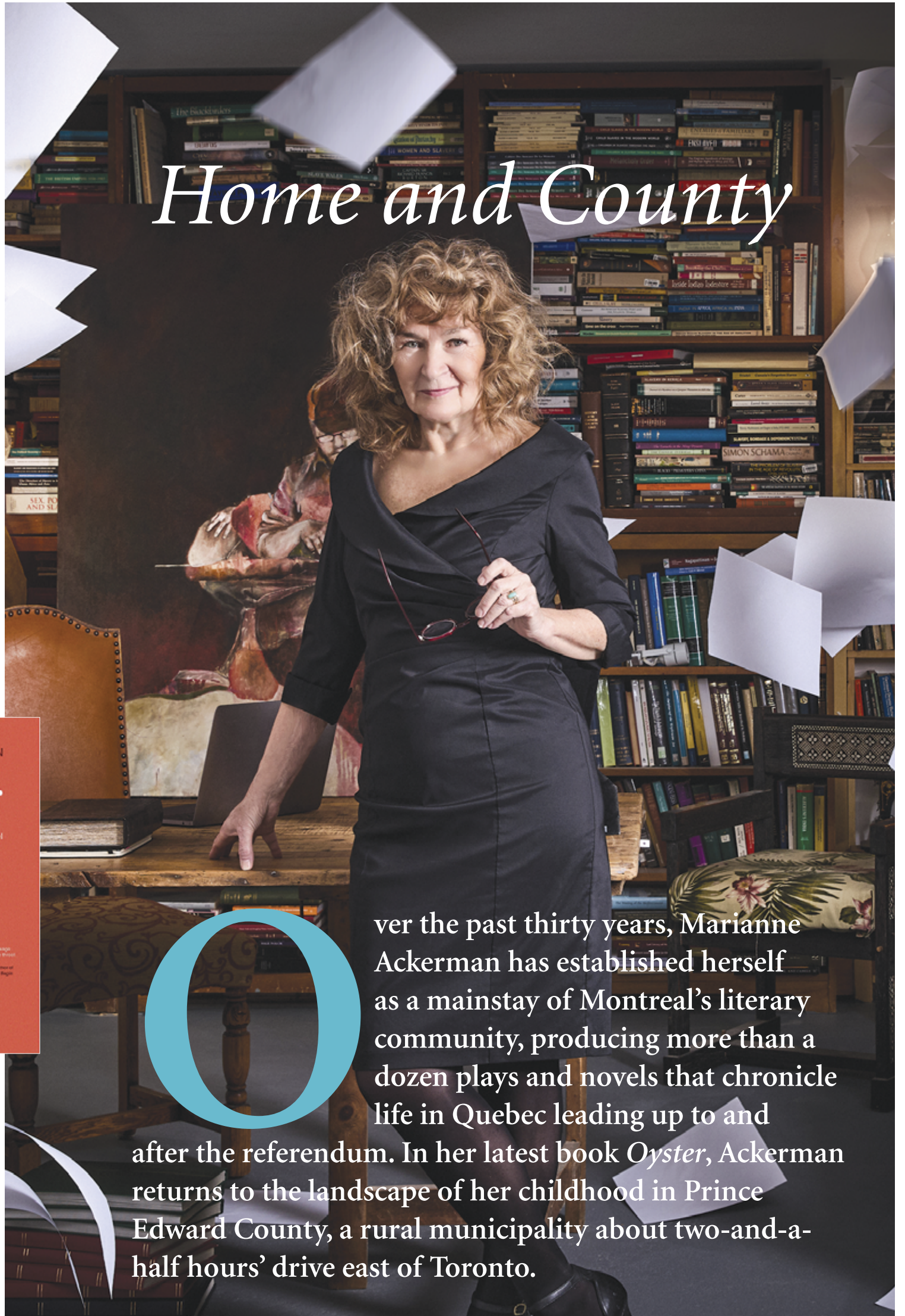
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BY ALEXANDRA SWENY

Home and County



Oyster
Marianne Ackerman
Dundurn Press
\$24.95, paperback, 256pp
9781459757035

Over the past thirty years, Marianne Ackerman has established herself as a mainstay of Montreal's literary community, producing more than a dozen plays and novels that chronicle life in Quebec leading up to and after the referendum. In her latest book *Oyster*, Ackerman returns to the landscape of her childhood in Prince Edward County, a rural municipality about two-and-a-half hours' drive east of Toronto.

Known colloquially by locals as simply the County, it's a region that, in recent years, has become a popular destination for tourists and Torontonians looking to swap the city's busyness for a taste of rural living. Proximity to provincial parks like Sandbanks and world-renowned vineyards have catapulted the County to the top of Canada's list of most desirable staycations – a feat which has had a polarizing effect on longtime locals.

"There's a kind of niceness, and also an insularity," says Ackerman, who was born in Belleville. "There's a lot of qualities about the County that I wanted to talk about, and the contrast of new people coming in, seeing potential, saying, *Oh, we could have this business. We could do our ceramics. We bring in new energy.*"

This, she says, is "the big conflict within the County right now. People are moving in, and some have been there for maybe twenty years now. And still, the old-timers are like, *What? Where's the neighbourhood going?*"

Social change – both those who applaud it, and those who resist it – is familiar terrain for Ackerman's fiction: her first novel, *Jump*, was set during the 1995 referendum. In *Oyster*, it's a subject Ackerman addresses on a microscale, within the dynamics of a family on the precipice of change.

"I wrote to find out what I think about a family that basically collapses with the death of a patriarch," she says. "What will it take? What would it take to keep the clan going? It takes the centre."

So goes the Yeatsian adage – "things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" – and *Oyster* begins quite literally with a tumble: protagonist Amelia Cameron, a one-time bestselling author, receives a call at her home in Toronto's Cabbagetown informing her that her father, Harold, has fallen from the roof of his County farmhouse. In the wake of his death, Amelia and her siblings must determine not only how to divvy up the family estate, but also how to relate to one another in the absence of the centre who grounded them all.

It's a question, Ackerman writes in the book's foreword, that has preoccupied her since the death of her own father in 2007. Like Harold, Ackerman's father also died in a "freak accident," leaving behind a tangled legacy. "It really threw our family into a state," she says. "It did really unleash a crisis, or a reconfiguration, of who we are in the family." But that, she says, "is a different story."

Indeed, a book written in the first person with an author protagonist dabbles dangerously close to the realm of autofiction – tricky business, when family secrets are on the line. With some bits seemingly lifted

from life, it's a question I put forth to Ackerman: How does she view the genre of this story?

For Ackerman, *Oyster* is something else altogether. "It's like a bird's nest," she says. "You look at a bird's nest and you'll see tiny bits of cloth and things the bird has gathered up from around the yard – little, very familiar pieces have gone into the weaving of it. Yet the thing itself is a totally different home now."

Indeed, while the death of the patriarch serves as the book's catalyst, there's another major plot woven throughout: literary fraud. At Harold's funeral, Amelia is reunited with her niece Ginny Gupta, newly admitted to Concordia's creative writing program on the basis of a promising outline for a novel. When Ginny later calls

I don't tell any of my family secrets. But I hope I root out everybody's family secrets.

Amelia in tears, complaining of writer's block and irritating classmates, Amelia invites her to visit in Toronto. What ensues is a wine-soaked weekend in which Amelia, eager for reprieve from a slogging rewrite of her own latest project, begins filling in the holes in Ginny's outline. The resulting book, *The World is Your Oyster*, is a hit with Amelia's agent Barry and launches the two women into a flurry of stardom and scandal.

Satires about tokenization in the publishing industry have become a trend in recent fiction, including R.F. Kuang's *Yellowface* (2023) and Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001). *Oyster* follows in the same tradition, drawing its inspiration from the true story of Romain Gary, who famously won the prestigious Prix Goncourt in 1975 for his book *La vie devant soi*, published under the Algerian surname Émile Ajar. When the time to accept the prize came, Gary enlisted his nephew Paul Pavlowitch to give a face to the pseudonym. In this way, Ackerman sets up Amelia and Ginny as modern-day female analogs.

"I love intergenerational stories," says Ackerman. "Parents and children have been kind of done to death, but aunts and nieces, they really interest me."

Ginny and Amelia's plotline plays on the overarching theme of familial relationships and secrecy – especially when Amelia learns that Ginny's outline is based on her childhood, threatening to blow family secrets out of the

water and terminate Amelia's already strained relationship with her sister Jean, Ginny's mother. It also raises questions about the future of CanLit, and positions Amelia as a writer, much like the County that produced her, at a crossroads.

Just as Ackerman namedrops familiar hallmarks of the CanLit industry, such as the Frankfurt Book Fair ("That dying circus?" her agent scoffs) and the ever-troubled Giller Prize, so too does she reference real local businesses within the County: Amelia and her sister-in-law visit Ste. Anne's Spa in Grafton; she and Barry have a drink at the waterfront Drake in Wellington. Both these communities – the County, the Canadian publishing industry – are insular: everybody knows everybody. I ask Ackerman why she decided to situate the high-stakes scandal of *Oyster* amidst real-world referents – why not set the drama in a fictional town of Anywhere, Ontario?

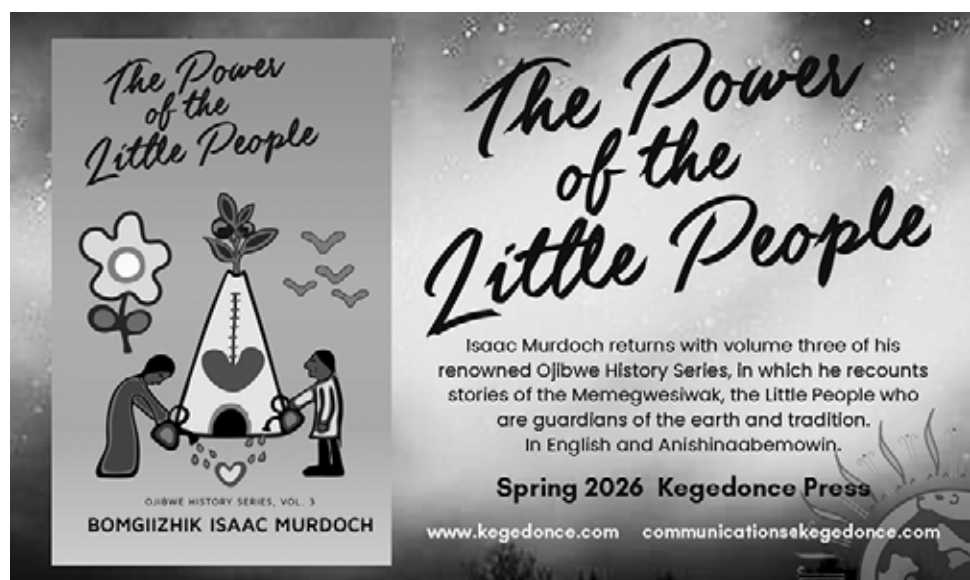
Specificity, it turns out, is the point. "I think places, communities, are hungry for looks at themselves, whether they agree with it all or not," Ackerman says. "I think that I'm a turf writer. I always have been. I think that people's social and even geographical context has a big impact on personality and options, choices, who you are, identity. I love exploring that. I could not be a speculative writer, put somebody in a made-up place."

Likewise, Ackerman continues, "I don't tell any of my family secrets. But I hope I root out everybody's family secrets."

It's in the attention to the particulars, in other words, that universal themes emerge – a lesson Ackerman credits to her time in theatre.

"I think those little family problems loom very big in people's lives. I think that's still where we should put our attention, no matter how much the world is," she says. "I'm becoming less political as a writer as the years go by, because I feel less and less we need to capture the moment. And who would capture this moment? What? What kind of a task would that be?" She gestures around, invoking the happenings of the past ten years – the pandemic, two Trump presidencies, political unrest at home and abroad. "I'm more interested now in eternal themes like, how do we misunderstand each other? What kind of moves do we make, despite ourselves, to pull up some kind of meaning out of our personal lives? Which I think is really what I like to write about." mrb

Alexandra Sweny is a writer in Montreal and associate publisher of the *mRb*.



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Mythical Detours

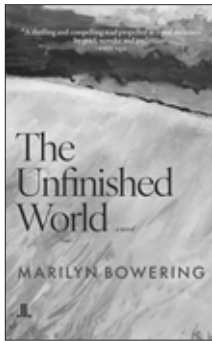
The Unfinished World
Marilyn Bowering
Linda Leith Publishing
\$26.95, paperback, 400pp
9781773901800

If you were to unravel your family story, follow its threads across time and place, where would it lead you? In Marilyn Bowering's *The Unfinished World*, the journey is tinged with magic. It carries the reader from prehistoric Spain to ancient Greece, from the bellies of ships to the wilderness of remote islands and mysterious kingdoms. But Bowering's novel is not a fantastical epic. It is a modern tale of loss and self-discovery, as one woman navigates the aftermath of her grandmother's death. Grief anchors it in reality, as do the many problems plaguing us today, like environmental degradation and economic inequality.

If you are confused as to how all these elements come together into a cohesive narrative, trust in Bowering; she will surprise you at every corner. Her story centres around Pearl, a well-meaning but

messy twenty-something writing about foraging and food, while hiding from failed love and financial woes (a classic combination). When her grandmother Nora dies, it changes the course of Pearl's life. She decides to retrace Nora's last journey.

At every stop – Nora's charming old house, her rickety cabin in the woods, and the shelter she owned by a river – Pearl uncovers a doll, handmade and passed down through generations. Each doll represents one of Pearl's and Nora's ancestors, or so we're meant to believe. Here is where the magic seeps in. The dolls are accompanied by a note from Nora, begging Pearl to write their stories. "When you write the story, don't forget to put that in," instructs each note containing a fact about the doll. These folktales break up the narrative of Pearl's trip. They tell of Pythagoras' wife chatting philosophy with a poet, a Spanish troubadour saving a girl from a siege, an orphan named Rib following a cat on an adventure, and stowaway twins seeking out a new life at sea. In parallel, back in the real world, Pearl reconnects with family members, works



at a fish plant, falls in love, and discovers the life her grandmother left behind.

This book truly delighted me; it's imaginative and intelligent, peppered with poetic and mythical detours. The tonal differences between Pearl's story and her storytelling are obvious at first, but just when you find your balance between real and unreal, Bowering blurs the lines. The more Pearl delves into the wild world where her grandmother once resided, the more her story becomes tangled with nature, and the more her own magic is revealed. Of course, she is not casting spells – it's not that kind of magic. But there is *something* about Pearl. She charms instantly, animals flock to her, she calms fish and swims with them. The last tale to be told is her own; as she discovers her purpose through her grandmother's legacy, she becomes a part of her family's lore.

The Unfinished World reminds us of the power of storytelling, of remembering those we have lost and learning from them. Bowering writes: "Not every story can be told, Pearl writing, reminds herself; most are stored forever within those who lived them, and not everyone can bear their telling." The book's title bothered me at first; it seemed to hint at something incomplete, yet, to me,



Bowering's world is anything but. It's made up of so many different people and places, described in rich detail and dispersed across history. In the end, I understood its meaning. Every world opens a door to a new one, to a new life. Her world is unfinished because it's endless, because we are still weaving our own stories into it.

For this first-time Bowering reader, this was a beautiful introduction to her work, which includes award-winning non-fiction, essays, and poetry. Just like Pearl chasing dolls and their stories, I want to trace my way back through her bibliography and see what other marvels are hiding there. **mb**

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

Between You and Eye

Between the Island and the Turtle
Karine Rosso
Translated by Anita Anand
Baraka Books
\$16.95, paperback, 202pp
9781771864015

Karine Rosso's *Between the Island and the Turtle* opens at the dawn of a new year, with a countdown from five and a stated intention to "embrace solitude." The early pages of the novel pass impressionistically, and it soon becomes clear that the year in question is 2020. The pandemic encroaches upon the narrator and her daughter, and the cruel irony is that her year's goal – to embrace solitude – has been decisively fulfilled. "What do we do now that time is collapsing?" the narrator asks. We turn to the past, the novel answers.

This is Rosso's second work of autofiction, a genre with a rich feminist lineage in Quebec, including the work of Nelly Arcan, the subject of both Rosso's doctoral dissertation and her previous novel, *Mon ennemie Nelly* (Hamac, 2019). Writing in the immersive second person,



Rosso entwines her reader with her unnamed narrator's experiences of temporal, spatial, bodily, and ideological dislocations and dissociations throughout. Her work is translated delicately by Anita Anand, herself a lyrical novelist. Formally, the novel unfolds as a series of linked vignettes; Rosso's writing (and Anand's translation) is at once concrete and abstract, decisive and searching, theoretical and cinematic.

Rosso's narrative surrogate determines to use this imposed solitude productively.

She unearths a long-abandoned book project: an account of her travels through South and Central America in the early 2000s, selling handmade jewellery to tourists, making fleeting but enduring connections with locals and other travellers. These kinetic scenes are vibrant, critical, and absorbing, but the narrator cannot commit fully to her past because of the intensive pull of her present.

Stitched into these excerpts are apt and difficult reports of more immediate scenes of crisis: the epidemic of unhousedness that becomes newly visible during the early lockdowns, and the creeping isolation of watching the street from inside one's home. Interwoven with empathetic reckonings of the displacements exacerbated by the pandemic is the narrator's account of the sudden onset of visual impairment, during a time when vision has become the primary mode of contact with the world:

It's obvious that each successive wave came to deposit huge stones on your life's already rocky riverbank, contributing to the wall erected along your brain's central sulcus, near the corpus callosum, the bridge connecting both hemispheres and relaying information through its median structure scaffolded on the lateral

ventricle, an image found on the web. Even in moments of specificity pertaining to the narrator's neuro-ophthalmologic crisis, Rosso braids her reader into these experiences of disconnection. There are moments when the book feels almost too close to the lived texture of early lockdown; the duality of insulation and exposure blur into a virtual hellscape of solitude and disembodiment. It is easy, and unsettling, to read oneself into the "you" of the narrator's voice.

While the novel can be bracing, it also offers some sense of catharsis: "You still take refuge in fiction," she writes, "because the voices discussing literature on the radio are the only ones that succeed in bringing you out of your misery." These figures of literature, some canonical, some closer to home, orient the narrator as past and present crises blur together – Don Quixote foremost among them. Like Cervantes' knight-errant, Rosso's narrator is acutely aware of the danger of narrativizing one's life through inherited forms. Don Quixote does not see the world as it is because he cannot relinquish the stories that once sustained him. *Between the Island and the Turtle* asks what happens when you intentionally loosen your grip on those sustaining narratives. **mb**

Paisley Conrad is a writer and critic. She lives in Montreal.

Swimming in the Dark

Breathing Is How Some People Stay Alive
 Alison Gadsby
 Guernica Editions
 \$22.95, paperback, 214pp
 9781778490156

What is life but a series of decisions and circumstances that have brought each of us to where we are now? The stories contained within *Breathing Is How Some People Stay Alive* examine the lives of folks who have made poor choices or who have met extremely unfortunate fates. This could be because a person's world is small, or they're a robot, or they can control time, or they simply don't know how else to be.

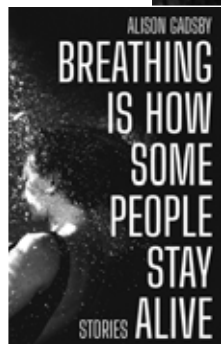
While many characters are humanoid machines, it would be diminutive to lump the works into simply sci-fi or speculative fiction. As our daily lives become entrenched in AI, a sentient robotic companion or caregiver doesn't feel like sci-fi so much as an inevitable future.

Take stories such as "The Deal with Roger" or "Jesus Is Drowning" (the former about a woman in a toxic relationship with a hateful android, the latter about a shut-in who is in denial about their own reality). They beg the question: Who is responsible for the insanity people tolerate in their own lives? Or maybe, more specifically, what we are willing to tolerate instead of being alone? What is required from a human to decide if they will spiral into loneliness or thrive in solitude?

As our daily lives become entrenched in AI, a sentient robotic companion or caregiver doesn't feel like sci-fi so much as an inevitable future.

Gadsby's writing is clean, sharp, and direct. Her words are driven and uplifting despite the emotionally complex and difficult themes the reader is exposed to. It would be unfair to characterize the collection as negative. The stories remain hopeful and strangely optimistic, and underline the power of even a small change. Many are stories of survival, tales of escape, of finding freedom and resolution, or of folks simply taking a moment to allow themselves to come up for air.

The subtle thread of swimming is woven throughout each work. There's water, there's swimsuits, there's swimming as a team sport, and there's always a risk of drowning. Swimming feels so specifically referential to small-town life: a youth team activity that is social and keeps kids occupied and out of the house. Soccer moms will surely identify with this element, though it also could be taken as a nod to that forced-fun feeling of organized sport.



ANGELA LEWIS

The swimming theme invokes both danger and freedom. On the strange-sci-fi tip, there are stories herein where android companions are lured into water to be put out of commission, and other stories where humans dive in and glide toward moments of solitude, reflection and peace.

Many of the protagonists are women who have been abandoned or left to take care of family members because nobody else would do it. It is a poignant observation about the role of women in modern society, and the invisible labour that is often expected of them. We meet characters like Clare in "Bruises Don't Leave Scars," who cares for her incapacitated father while also mitigating a fraught relationship with her burnout brother. These are stories about unconscious life-ruiners, and the emotional journeys of those who choose to carry on despite their worlds being void of empathy.

The last quarter of the collection takes a notably darker turn. Stories like "Irreplaceable" (a complicated father-daughter relationship that ends in drowning), "I Don't Want to Fall But I Do" (a woman is disappointed when a crime against her does not happen) and "Payment for the Ride" (a depressed caregiver fantasizes about becoming a predator) all similarly explore broken relationships, disappointing male partners, or disappeared family members. Mostly, they explore the dark realities faced by shattered women who've been left to pick up the pieces of their own lives.

In the closing story, "The Going Rate for Grief," a parent consoles a troubled tween by offering the advice: "We all have complicated relationships with our families." This statement practically summarizes the collection and the messed-up lives of the characters therein.

These stories serve as a reminder that sometimes breathing is enough. Living one breath to the next is already *a lot*. It's how some people stay alive. mb

Natalia Yanchak is a published speculative fiction author and video games writer. She has written and produced content for *VICE*, *CBC*, *Cult Montreal*, and *Paper Magazine*. She also plays in Montreal rock band The Dears. @nataliayanchak nataliayanchak.com

Liquid Story

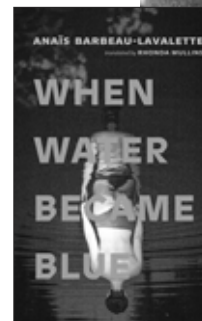
When Water Became Blue
 Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette
 Translated by Rhonda Mullins
 Coach House Books
 \$24.95, paperback, 176pp
 9781552455098

The structure of Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette's *When Water Became Blue* is a masterclass in time travel; the first three micro-chapters of the novel are an epilogue of sorts, and the last page of the novel circles back to where it all begins. In this moment, the unnamed protagonist and her daughter, their eyes toward the sky, welcome back the Canada geese from their travels down south. Spring is here, signalling renewal.

In between this capped narrative, her story unfolds as a writer looking for inspiration while on an artists' retreat, away from her husband, Sasha, and daughter, Ama. On this retreat, on a small, almost deserted island in the middle Saint Lawrence River, she meets a painter (also unnamed), who will become her lover, a marine biologist named Narcisse, and Hisaé, a Japanese archeologist, who are all taken care of by the guardians of the lighthouse, Clo and Yvonne. We come to understand that the retreat is an escape, a safe one, over the course of which she allows herself to fall in love with this painter.

This intimate exploration of how she gives in to her desire is layered with accounts of famous artists' personal lives, including that of Barbeau-Lavalette's own grandfather, Marcel Barbeau, among others. The themes of water and nature are all-encompassing, creating the rhythm by which she and the others live while on the island. How can she redefine her own female desire against the one defined by philosophers, writers, Greek mythology, and artists, all mostly male?

Each page is filled with capsule-like observations of the physical world rebounding off her innermost thoughts, in a space where writing, painting, and the river merge to capture the essence of a colour, of a state of being and of inspiration. The chapters are of varying length but short, with the shortest ones being poem-like, mimicking uneven waves hitting the shore. Everything seems to tie back to the colour blue, Barbeau-



LAWRENCE FAFARD

Lavalette's family history, love, death, and desire.

The writing is intimate, in the first person, and she addresses her lover in the second person. The affair feels almost opportunistic until she gets completely caught up in it. She is supposed to write. But before she is able to, something must be provoked in order to erase the void created by her lack of inspiration. Sasha and Ama are not there; she is free and able to "let go of the mainland" and "drift toward" her lover and "make the river [their] liquid story."

Extrapolating what is real and what is fictional in the novel is unimportant. The way Barbeau-Lavalette beautifully weaves between both is part of the novel's attraction. The filiation of women across generations, from grandmother to granddaughter and then again from mother to daughter, is the thread that connects the main character to her internal journey of letting desire take over and its eventual splintering when confronted with the reality of society. Rhonda Mullins' powerful translation has captured the subtleties of the author's voice and her economy of words, all the while recreating the underlying narrative so delicately assembled in French. mb

Sharon Morrissey is hiding out here from her other professional life.

Lyrical Layers

Together by the Sea
Marie-Claire Blais
 Translated by Katia Grubisic
 House of Anansi Press
 \$24.99, paperback, 256pp
 9781487006358

It's good to be reminded, from time to time, that every life is as alive as the imperious flicker of our own, as is done in *Together by the Sea*, tragically, beautifully, and if you hear this review in your head, speaking itself between commas into vast, unending consciousness, know this is an attempt to bring you closer to the work of Marie-Claire Blais, a writer known sometimes for writing entire novels with just one protracted sentence, likened often to Virginia Woolf, and known always for her incisive, original language that displaces its usual conventions.

The book, translated by Katia Grubisic from the original French and the final volume in the *Soifs* series, unfolds in a short period of time preceding, preparing for, a celebration, or rather celebrations: the opening night of Le Fantasque bar with its beautiful trans performers, the meal celebrating Carlos's return to his family after a prison sentence, and Mai's eighteenth birthday, held on the unnamed island owned by the old Uncle Isaac, on the edge of the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico. Blais' characters are

vivacious, vibrant, and even the dead quiver with life. Memories of the deceased fold into the present, which folds into layers of history, from the horrors of bygone fascist regimes to modern America with its mass shooters and fight for civil rights.

That this novel is written in unending lines peppered with commas – that the first period appears four pages in – is an approach to language one might expect to be dense or difficult to consume. Rather than focusing on following exact plotlines, it is more important to follow the themes of the novel, to empathize with the many interlocked perspectives,

Blais' characters are vivacious, vibrant, and even the dead quiver of life.

and to allow the writing to wash over your mind, as you would the ocean over your feet. Trust me that once you settle yourself into that period-less rhythm, which may require a dozen or more pages of patience, the experience of reading will become so smooth, so immersive, as if something has overtaken your mind and you feel truly in tune not only with the writing, but also with the entire human experience.

In our current age of identity politics, it may seem all the more bold for a white

woman author to create a narrator who inhabits so many disparate characters with ease and seemingly little reservations, from Black trans sex workers to Nazi doctors. The narrator is a kind of omnipresence who slips in and out of different minds, maybe parasitically or possessively, but more so passively, voyeuristically, empathically. The result is something overwhelmingly genuine and comprehensive, that proves its commitment to the idea of humanity as a shared experience. *Together by the Sea* will likely bring you a better understanding of the acutely contemporary life all around us, but it may also bring you to tears as it does so – not necessarily through its glittering language, nor through its cascading narrative work, but through its unflinching representation of reality that may bring you to recognize life for its depth and fragility.

This work is meant to push past limits and ends, long-winding but not long-winded, until it does end, 219 pages past the start, at which point the entire *Soifs* series ends too, ten books in. The last forty pages present an immensely tragic apex before moving on swiftly to celebration and happiness. "This book



JILL GLESSING

you're writing is the most lyrical, the most beautiful, it's almost too cryptic," says one character, Frédéric, to another, Charles, in the book's final section, "perhaps the lesson of hope is too transcendental for your readers." We can only hope *Together by the Sea*, with its musings on life, so alive, fleeting and too grand, on human violence and wrongdoing, on privilege and defensiveness, on disintegrative and integrative humanity, the happy and the trusting, the insular and elitist, is not too great a lesson for us. It may break your heart, or it may help you understand what is broken around you already, or it may only make you pause for a moment, that is, if you allow it. **mb**

India Das-Brown is a writer, editor, and journalist in Montreal. Her work has appeared in outlets including *CityNews Montreal* and *The Eastern Door*, and her first poetry chapbook will be out this year with Cactus Press. She loves Betty Boop and shoes.

Fracturing Moments

There's Always More to Say
Natalie Southworth
 Linda Leith Publishing
 \$26.95, paperback, 170pp
 9781773901862

What better title than *There's Always More to Say* for a collection of stories by a debut author who, presumably, is just getting started. In nine discrete tales, Natalie Southworth weaves the difficult topic of mental health with ordinary experiences of everyday life, told mainly from the perspective of an adolescent. She writes with compassion about characters who are suffering, individuals and families as a whole, blaming no one for the damage that is done but detailing how everyone is affected. Taken together, there is a sadness to the collection, a sense of failure or regret at our inability to protect the vulnerable, especially children, from the shattering and consequential episodes that go on to define their lives.

In a clever arrangement, the reader is introduced to two sisters, Cora and Rachel, in the opening (and titular) story



VIVIAN DOAN



and returned to them, twice, in subsequent stories. Each is a glimpse of a fracturing moment, a single layer in a private struggle that compounds over time. In "There's Always More to Say," the girls' parents have divorced and are living in tiny, separate apartments, though their mother is seemingly in a different world. While Rachel, the elder, builds a coping mechanism rooted in the rejection of all her mother embraces – horoscopes, science fiction, psychedelics, blind faith –

Cora is made of softer stuff, unable to cut herself free. In the final story, "Inheritance," the sisters are middle-aged. News comes from Victoria that their mother has died, "alone as planned," and they meet for the first time in five years. Not quite estranged but no longer close, they have little to say to each other. Cora does not know her brother-in-law or nephew; Rachel doesn't know that Cora is alone. While a sliver of hope is injected at the end, the story also serves as a reminder of what could have been. They escaped their mother's illness directly, but it left a gaping hole in their lives.

Southworth writes evocative sentences, and there are keen observations throughout. In "The Realtor," when a man can't make a go of a second career and his wife is pleading his case to his boss, the image of a downtrodden man appears vivid and alive: "All he could do was stand there, arms at his side. His shirt was wrinkled down the front along the buttons and his brown dress pants were baggy at the knees. It looked like he'd been unpacked from a suitcase and set up into a standing position." In "Spectacular," when a classmate becomes obsessed with the emaciated body of an anorexic girl, harrowing descriptions are woven into the narrative: "Fiona's spine could've

been a pasta tong that was trying to bore through her skin"; "I could see the notches along her shinbone protruded like the bumps in peanut brittle"; "Her chest bones were ripples on a dead lake." More than unsettling, these sentences convey the perverseness of the fascination, and the harm done by onlookers, including parents, who watch from a distance and do nothing.

Variation in structure, voice, and context is less evident in this collection than might be expected. All the stories unfold in similar settings, featuring characters with similar backgrounds: secular, middle class, urban Canadians who likely grew up around the same time as the author. Often, near the end of a story, there is a narrative leap forward of several years or decades, which becomes somewhat predictable. But read at intervals, none of this detracts greatly from a formidable debut collection. The question that lingers when the last page is turned is the one that was hinted at from the start: *What else does Natalie Southworth have to say?* **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 *Montreal Review of Books*, *The Miramichi Reader*, *subTerrain*, and *Ex-Puritan*.

graphic

Embodied Connections

Physical Education

Joana Mosi

Pow Pow Press

\$29.95, paperback, 170pp

2925114601

Physical Education is a title so pointed, it's almost a spoiler.

At its core, it's a meditation on how the life of the mind – especially when it's filtered through the chaotic ADD of smartphone feeds – distances us from being grounded in what's real, while physical presence and proximity can help return that connectedness.

This slim graphic novel is the latest title by Portuguese creator Joana Mosi to be published by Montreal's Pow Pow Press, which also put out last year's *The Mongoose*. It follows thirty-ish writer Laura on a string of social encounters in Lisbon's artsy intellectual scene. Vignettes from her *flâneuse* life in bars, classrooms, and cafés are punctuated by snippets of the infinite scroll – that attention-grabbing clickbait loop of listicles,



playlists, horoscopes, quizzes, celebrity gossip, trending video, and shopping carts that we all have on hand, all the time. This format serves Mosi's themes well; her juxtaposition of social episodes with social media patter is disorienting at first, but grows more

impactful through repetition as it builds into a satisfying show-don't-tell read.

Laura has recently won a prestigious grant to finish her first novel, and everyone in her social scene has heard and seems eager to talk about it. But her reticence on the novel's progress makes it clear that Laura is stuck. She's unable to focus on her work, flipping between her writing laptop and phone, where she idly browses the endless flow of content that's always just *there*.

Floating panels of unread-message notifications and headlines recur frequently enough that Laura's phone



PRUNE PAYCHA

starts to feel like a character, given presence through iteration and highlighting the grind of smartphone ownership and its endless invitations to engage. Mosi surfaces the scattered attentions of the digital moment with an elliptical storytelling style that builds weight and momentum through repetition. At times, it can be a bit hard to follow her narrative threads, but that's kind of the point – our understanding of our own lives and others' are shaped by one-off snapshots, but it's often unclear whether these moments matter or are merely Instagrammable.

Mosi's drawing style offers a sharp contrast to the crisp precision of digital graphics. She deploys a shaggy, rounded line with patchy splashes of fill, a loose style that works best when it's communicating vibes, as in one nightlife scene where Laura's cathartic release is

clear in just the shape of her blouse in silhouette as she dances.

Mosi also zooms in on odd moments, dedicating whole pages to sequences showing each step of some usually mundane action that typically wouldn't merit depiction at all: fingers rolling a cigarette, a cropped torso doing reps, hands opening a wine bottle. Her care in detailing these actions strikes a contrast between bodily, connected everyday rituals – peeing, working out, making out, taking a nap – and the listless ephemera of our mediated lives. Images from passively consumed social media and films form a layer between Laura and her friends and the outside world, an interpretive lens that permeates and overlies everything else.

Physical Education follows Laura on a few trips to the gym with friends, where she's forced to put her phone down and engage. Mostly, she pushes weights and chats, but her social group is intrigued by the onsite pool, and near the end of the book, Laura dives in.

In the water – no phone, no escape from the physical immersion in a sensory embodiedness – Mosi introduces a totally different aesthetic and art style, darkly inked with churning water filling most of the page, just cropped bits of Laura's body floating by. Totally disconnected from her phone and her social scene, she's shown grounded in the physical life of her body, where she is, for once, actually connected. **mb**

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

Working Class Masterclass

The Woodchipper

Joe Ollmann

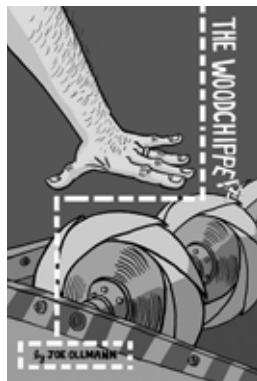
Drawn & Quarterly

\$35, paperback, 216pp

9781770468238

Municipal decay meets the quiet, crushing weight of working-class survival. In his latest collection, Joe Ollmann operates with what seems to be his unique special ingredient: jaded empathy. His mastery of grim, empathetic realism shines in *The Woodchipper*. Ollmann drafts such specific characters who seem defined by their own decline. It's that sense of deterioration that he does really well.

In the title story, a chain of bad luck and even worse decisions leave our characters perpetually suspended in anxious motion. "The Woodchipper" is a study of the "butterfly effect" of a trauma in which, technically, nothing actually happens. Personally, I have always found the actual physical woodchipper machine/tool/nightmare to represent a kind of apex of industrial horror. A machine designed, it seems, not just to destroy, but to unmake form entirely, it reduces structure to an indistinguishable mulch. Ollmann taps directly into my fear and recoil through Charles, a veteran of a city maintenance crew. Charles nearly kills a dim-witted coworker named Kirby by almost activating the chipper while the boy is obliviously inside the chute, looking for his phone.



Though the physical disaster is avoided, the psychological collapse is total: Charles is soon haunted by what he identifies as "unwanted thought syndrome," an intrusive, internal loop that renders everyday objects like coffee grinders and blenders into triggers for debilitating PTSD. His subsequent spiral into OxyContin addiction, and his eventual public shaming via a viral video, create a portrait of a man destroyed by the proximity to a tragedy that never quite arrived. Ollmann's shaky, heavily inked lines suggest a human hand that is tired, and deeply invested in the grit of the story.

Ollmann's ability to find dark, existential comedy in airless spaces continues in "Nestled All Snug." Set in a bookstore appropriately named "Book Freak," the story follows Sasha, who chooses to work alone on Christmas Eve. It is a decision that leads to her being literally trapped in a bathroom by a toppled stack of return boxes. The story transforms into a locked room mystery, where the only thing being solved is the persistence of her own alienation. The "high noise" environment of the cluttered bookstore reinforces the mental clutter Sasha is attempting to organize.

In "Meat," Kara, a security guard who views herself as "Paul Blart with a moral compass," navigates the tension between a petty authoritarian coworker, and a group of animal rights activists. Kara's accidental tether to Xia, a vegan protestor, leads her from the front gate, straight into the core of the plant's research lab. Before the heavy security protocols kick in, a human glitch happens, and



the two just end up eating together at Char Burger. Over onion rings and root beer is where they find an oddly peaceful middle ground.

Whether exploring the domestic fatigue of a long-term marriage in "The Thought That Counts" or the silent labour of a motel janitor in "The Late Checkout," Ollmann perfectly captures the feeling of small, everyday tragedies. *The Woodchipper* is an often uncomfortable read that refuses easy redemption. Through his use of thick, deliberate lines and crowded panels, Ollmann perfectly captures the claustrophobia of his subjects' lives, while offering a look at the

trauma of the "near-miss" and the search for grace amidst the rubble.

Ollmann reminds us that while we are all trying to avoid the blades of our own personal woodchippers, the true tragedy is often the internal machinery that keeps spinning long after the engine has been cut. From the claustrophobic panic of a bookstore bathroom in "The Late Checkout" to the industrial drudgery of the slaughterhouse of "Meat," Ollmann captures the unglamorous reality of the working class. The collection is a masterclass in grounded storytelling. It creates a world that feels undeniably real, populated by people who are just trying to survive their own intrusive thoughts. There is a strange, quiet peace to be found in seeing these struggles mapped out with such accuracy. **mb**

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

Little Toad, Big Picture

Alyte
Jérémie Moreau
 Translated by Nick Frost and Catherine Ostiguy
 Milky Way Picture Books
 \$35.99, hardcover, 304pp
 9781990252471

“The current will take everything if we allow it.”

So counsels Iode, the energetic salmon, as he swims against the slipstream. In Jérémie Moreau’s *Alyte*, the title character is a young, nervous tadpole, the sole survivor of a dangerous journey to water. Newly emerged, the world greets Alyte with endless, overwhelming currents, until Iode takes him under its fin.

Moreau’s art style makes our amphibian protagonist effortlessly endearing – who could resist the glossy-eyed smile of a baby toad as it makes its first friend? With tiny dotted eyes, gooey edges, and a wide, awed mouth, Alyte is delightfully animated and expressive.

It’s through Alyte’s naive lens and a sort of *Finding Nemo* charm that we get glimpses into the many worldviews of the animal kingdom. As Iode swims them through the wide, wet world, he describes the furry paws that scrape the riverbed as angry demigods, the webbed feet pedalling the water’s surface as “liminal feathers.” Predators are more uneasy, knowing the only law is the survival of the fittest. But it seems that the smallest creatures have the strongest sense of ownership: a lounge of lizards bask in the warm glow of “the best drug in the universe,” a dung beetle rolls



dirt up into a new planet for orbit. As Alyte grips Iode’s scales with his newly emerged legs, the pair leap into the sky and Iode declares: “We’re demigods! We *are* the storm, the current is us!”

The world of *Alyte* is dreamy revelry in colour, breathing lush life into every frame. Mossy green, nectar orange, lilac, mint, and blue-grey dusks soften the days where our little tadpole is tossed from fang to claw to talon, grappling with the fragility of life. Forests filled with loopy boughs, gradient colour washes, and wide landscapes reminiscent of Japanese woodblock prints – think Hokusai’s *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, for instance. But its scenery is never empty for long. From rocky peaks to the bubbly amoeba, *Alyte*’s animal philosophy permeates Moreau’s comfortable style, showcasing a world not of hard lines and stiff edges, but one where all parts are interconnected.

After a harrowing encounter with a screech owl, Axon, the oldest tree in the forest, shows Alyte just how deep this connection goes. He counsels Alyte to listen

to the planet’s vibration, and suddenly the weave of nature unfolds before us in a new way: the death of a sprout feeds a deer; the death of the deer feeds a wolf. “Silva sees the big picture,” says Axon. “Clouds, rivers, fertile soil, insects, animals... We are Silva. [...] Silva builds the world. A world where the Soleil flows.” Indeed, translators Nick Frost and Catherine Ostiguy kept many of the story’s original French names, which here lends a deeper sense of mystery to Axon’s worldview.

While the original French publisher, Éditions 2042, positioned *Alyte* as a graphic novel for general audiences, its English release with Milky Way Picture Books shelves it among a slate of

beautifully illustrated children’s books. True enough, this story does both, in the vein of classics like *The Little Prince* or *Charlotte’s Web*. *Alyte* is a tale that changes the scale of our thinking, that brings the big, overwhelming world into the hands of kinder creatures to help us face it, tame it, and be amazed by it.

Soon, Axon, Alyte, and the whole of Silva must gather to dismantle their greatest enemy yet: Lethalyte, a two-lane speedway that sections the forest, separating families and creatures from precious resources. As predator and prey band together to dismantle the road, Alyte summons a spirit of survival and resilience, the same that animated Iode the salmon when they first met. A refusal to be swept up by the current, built on community and resilience. A beautiful fable for our difficult days. mb

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



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The Weight

Melissa Mendes

Drawn & Quarterly

\$39.95, paperback, 580pp

9781770467163

Melissa Mendes spent a decade crafting *The Weight*, first as a self-published series, then as a graphic novel. Set in 1940s rural America, it follows the turbulent youth of the protagonist, Edie, and the grinding realities of growing up in that era, especially for girls.

Shortly after Edie's birth at her grandparents' home, she and her mother, Marian, are taken away by Ray, the father and husband and an abusive drunk. They board a night train out of town, never informing the grandparents, Tess and Leland, of their whereabouts.

Edie's home life is grim. Her mother works with the public, at a store on a nearby military base, and often has a black eye, while young Edie simmers with rage at her mother's treatment. Edie decides that she will not be a victim. She hits back when provoked, something that will ultimately lead to her undoing.

Despite her bleak life at home, Edie is seen running through tall grass with friends, playing games and embarking on adventures. On one such exploit, they raft down the river on dinghies stolen from the military base. On another, they discover a morgue and make off with packages of cookies from a staff cupboard.

The situation at home escalates, and when eight-year-old Edie intervenes, her father turns his anger on her. Mendes uses fading images of her father atop Edie with his hands around her neck as she eventually loses consciousness. Then the panels go black. Later, Marian and Edie make a desperate run for the train to take them back to Tess and Leland, but Ray appears; only Edie boards, while Marian returns to face the music. After a tragedy and an initial rebellion, Edie settles at Tess and Leland's farm, where she eventually thrives.

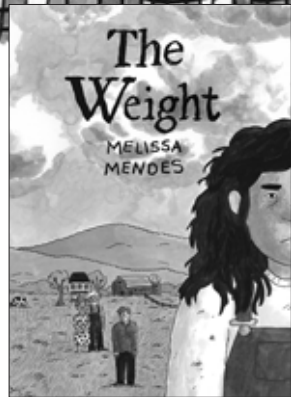
Using an ink wash technique that lends the panels the look of old photographs, Mendes excels at drawing animals and rural landscapes, setting a tone that contrasts sharply with the story's harsh realities. She relies on facial expressions more than speech bubbles to tell the story, and the narrative moves with elegance through three distinct periods: Edie with her parents, life with her grandparents, and finally Edie as a young mother. Violence and assault are far more common than moments of calm, though these scenes are tempered by the love and tenderness of Marian and Edie's grandparents, along with touches of dark humour. At 580 pages, the book is physically unwieldy, though narratively graceful – a remarkable feat.

The Weight echoes Steinbeck's themes – portraying people who long to escape systemic cycles of hardship and abuse, yet find themselves inevitably drawn back into them. This is tragically Edie's reality. With little agency, life simply happens to her, as it did to many young women in the 1940s, when the absence of birth control left them with few choices, and the only alternative to an unwanted pregnancy was a dangerous, illegal, back-alley abortion. Mendes has stated that the repeal of *Roe v. Wade* influenced the story, underscoring how these struggles remain painfully relevant even today.

I found the themes of domestic violence and unwanted pregnancy heavy, but the graphic novel format softened their impact, making them easier to digest than they might have been in prose. Through my Gen X lens, the story felt timeworn, yet I believe the intended audience – younger generations – will experience it through a different lens.

Mendes was right to call it *The Weight*, a title that captures the gravity of these issues. Yet the book serves a larger purpose: it illuminates what everyday life was like for women without access to birth control or safe, legal abortions – a reality that bears remembering, especially today. For this poignant reminder, Mendes deserves congratulations. **mrb**

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



PRUNE PAYCHA



Short Takes

Fruit Salad

Cathon

Translated by Robert Lang and Helge Dascher

Pow Pow Press

\$19.95, paperback, 160pp

9782925114536

A young cartoonist is having one of those days

creatives are known to have: she's feeling "drained and hollow," bereft of ideas, and unsure whether she'll ever have another one. From that low point she goes on a full-circle emotional journey that unfolds on a single page in the span of six panels, each of them not much bigger than a standard postage stamp (remember those?). By the end, at the bottom right corner of the page, having briefly thought that she *did* have a good idea but then changed her mind, she's back where she started, weeping with frustration as she binges on Doritos and Cheetos.

That's a pleasingly complete story right there, and it's just one in a 160-page book of mostly one-pagers. Montreal-based Cathon, perhaps best known as co-author of the NFB-adapted *The Great List of Everything*, shows a seemingly inexhaustible flair for concentrated narrative and illuminating anecdote, consistently providing object lessons in just how much information can be packed into a single page – or even a single panel – without resorting to clutter. She has a masterful touch with domestic minutiae and the dynamics of friendship, and can broaden her net with equal assurance, as when her promotional travels and holiday respites take her from Rimouski to Venice and she finds fresh perspectives on both.

Pastimes

Pascal Girard

Translated by Aleshia Jensen

Pow Pow Press

\$19.95, paperback, 144pp

9782925114543

Many *mRb* readers will know Saguenay-born Pascal Girard from his five graphic novels, commencing with 2011's *Bigfoot* and proceeding through 2021's *Rebecca and Lucie in the Case of the Missing Neighbor*. Like nearly all of his work, the new *Pastimes* is autofiction. The current Pascal, we soon see, has arrived at a life stage where he appears to be getting a head start on grumpy old man status. A social worker by profession and cartoonist by vocation, Pascal is always getting into trouble by the simple expedient of giving voice to the thoughts that most of us, constrained by quaint notions of politeness and deference, keep to ourselves. But he's also a family man with a heart of gold, and it's the finely maintained balance between misanthropy and compassion that makes him such rewarding company throughout *Pastimes*.

Girard's touch is best demonstrated in his vignettes of family life, where a genuine tenderness emerges. He doesn't mind fielding existential challenges from Lucie, his four-year-old daughter. "Dad, how come you have boobs even though you're not a girl?" she asks. "Uh, I'm not sure how to answer that," he answers, quite sensibly. Elsewhere, frustrated at Lucie's inability to comprehend environmental peril, he muses, "Talking to her about death is one thing. But climate change... I'm just not ready."

PRUNE PAYCHA



continued on next page

This diary-like book, drawn with the off-the-cuff freshness of a sketchbook and packing a profusion of belly laughs and emotional gut punches, is a gem.

Metadoggoz

Bérénice Motais de Narbonne
Translated by Montana Kane
Drawn & Quarterly
\$35, paperback, 256pp
9781770468252

French-Vietnamese Bérénice Motais de Narbonne looks set to make one of the biggest graphic novel splashes in years.

Future-dystopian fiction has been with us long enough by now to have accrued its own honoured traditions. Indeed, it might be time to stop thinking of it as a subgenre: an argument could be made that it's now the mainstream, the present having caught up with many of our worst fears for the future.

Metadoggoz, stunningly assured for a writer just two books into their career, demonstrates future dystopias' centrality to modern fiction by the seamlessness with which the author is able accommodate multiple genres and disciplines within its remit. More than one review has mentioned *Blade Runner*, and the affinity is undeniable. There are also elements of punk, cyberpunk, hardboiled crime, YA adventure stories, and good old-fashioned science fiction.

The novel's title refers to a group of teens living a near-feral existence in the Metastation, a megalopolis where post-apocalypse survivors have gathered. Among their number is Gael Kaldera, an orphan looking to redeem himself for having lost his best friend's heirloom guitar. The Metastation, dank and damp, seemingly endless, is a place where the sun is little more than a rumour. Its rendering in dramatically contrasting black and white – mostly black – convinces us that the reason the kids here are seeking escape, whether literally or via hallucinogenic drugs, is because any other place is surely better than where they are. Touchingly, they are learning to rely on each other because everyone else has let them down.

Meanwhile, the search for a lost talismanic electric guitar can't help but invoke the spirit of those avatars of adolescence, Rush. Is this future tale taking place in a 2112 of the mind, by any chance?



All the Cameras in My Room
Michael DeForge
Drawn & Quarterly
\$35, paperback, 219pp
9781770468191

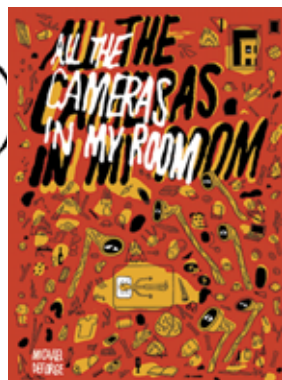
Michael DeForge has cited “mass culture, surveillance, and performance” as three of his main thematic jumping-off points, and when you think about it, those themes cover a whole lot of ground. Prepare, then, to place yourself in the hands of one of the most original, compelling and hilarious writers in the world.

All the Cameras in My Room is a short story collection (DeForge's second), and as such it might well constitute a useful entry point to DeForge's work for those who've found epics such as *The Birds of Maine* a tad forbidding. The story form, by its very definition, imposes a certain narrative concision, affording the opportunity to take the work in bite-sized chunks. Those same newcomers shouldn't be surprised, though, if they end up binging anyway.

Space won't permit a story-by-story rundown here, so a random selection will have to do. “Holiday Special” invokes Charles M. Schulz and Dr. Seuss, not that you would ever mistake it for *A Charlie Brown Christmas* or *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*. DeForge respects the essence of his influences while taking them to places where their creators – and his readers, and who knows, possibly DeForge himself – could never have

imagined they would go. “Larry Seedyseed,” as you might guess, is a new Johnny Appleseed, except that rather than planting trees across the USA, Larry becomes a folk hero by virtue of... well, there's really no other way to say it: he ejaculates everywhere. “Boy Band” takes the idea of contemporary pop superstars' slavish followings and runs with it; perhaps never has fan culture been so effectively skewered. The *tour de force*, “The Organizer,” is a fifty-page story about the infiltration of a leftist group. As has often been the case when DeForge brings his political concerns to the fore, the result ends up uncannily in tune with current world events.

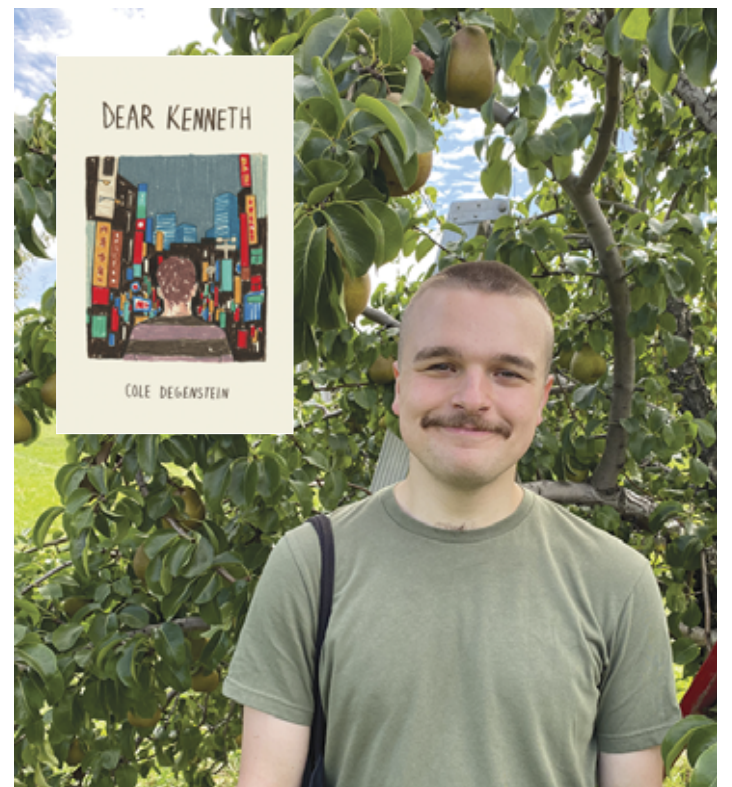
As for DeForge's visual style, any attempt at description feels doomed to inadequacy. It simply must be experienced. While a deep vein of comic gold is mined by DeForge's deft deployment of riotously surreal images cheek-by-jowl with (comparatively) straightforward prose, a different laughter also abounds: the rare kind elicited by sheer shake-your-head amazement at what you're seeing.



Dear Kenneth
Cole Degenstein
Conundrum Press
\$20, paperback, 140pp
9781772621204

For a novel whose word count barely exceeds 800 (yes, I counted), *Dear Kenneth* provides plenty of fodder for contemplation and speculation.

A few pages in, readers of Cole Degenstein's brilliant third novel would be forgiven for thinking they'd found something in the lineage of *Rilke's Letters to a Young Poet*. Two men – one a poet, the other a visual artist, both of them in Japan although not Japanese – are in long-distance correspondence after an unspecified time at close quarters. The trouble is that the correspondence has gone fallow: Kenneth, the older poet, hasn't been writing back to Cole, the younger artist, and Cole, to put it mildly, isn't happy about it. “I've not been well,



if I'm honest,” he writes. “I could say ‘I'm doing better these days,’ but it wouldn't actually mean anything.” You could cut the passive-aggressiveness with a knife, and things don't get any cheerier. For much of its duration *Dear Kenneth* reads, on one level at least, like a case study in depression and loneliness. Cole's missives grow more despairing by the page: “No one knows how to be anywhere anymore. Everyone talks at the movies and stands in the middle of the sidewalk. Everyone is the only person in the world.” But is Cole simply performing his anomie as a means of instilling guilt in his negligent correspondent? Has he been projecting onto Kenneth all along? Were the two men ever actually connected in any significant way? Conversely, might this be the aftermath of a love affair gone wrong? Adventurous reading clubs would do well to choose *Dear Kenneth*. The debates could go on for hours.

With a book so light on text it can be tempting, as a reader, to speed through it, but ideally you'll stop and linger over every page, giving the images and words the time and mental space to work their complementary alchemy. The images themselves are rendered in graphite and coloured pencil, and simple descriptions are unlikely to set the pulse racing: potted plants looking distinctly neglected; a small building in Kyoto with a cracked facade and a frayed awning; row upon row of what look like non-prescription medicines arranged on a shop shelf. Somehow Degenstein invests it all with the spirit of poetry. **mb**

Ian McGillis is a writer and editor living in Montreal.

Matthew Purvis

Horny History

Matthew Purvis' *The Pornographic Delicatessen* won the 2025 Bookseller/Diagram prize for Oddest Book Title of the Year. The eyebrow-raising title comes courtesy of Montreal poet Denis Vanier, who used it for a 1968 book and also plays a key role in Purvis' study.

The Pornographic Delicatessen argues that eroticism wasn't a fringe curiosity – it was right at the heart of marginal art. Set in the decades following the Second World War – a period that includes the late Duplessis era and the transformative years leading into the Quiet Revolution – the book uncovers a vibrant and often overlooked world of artistic experimentation. It also follows how those once-outsider impulses were slowly folded into the state-supported art institutions that were taking shape at the time. Purvis rummages through a trove of erotic material to resurrect artworks that have largely faded from view, from a moment when the boundaries of what could count as “art” were wide open.

Montreal has long carried a reputation for being a horny city. Thanks to Purvis' deep (and lively) research, we now get a clearer – and more entertaining – sense of how it earned it.

The *mRb* talked to Purvis about some of the themes in the book.

mRb: If the medium is the message (à la Marshall McLuhan), and if the city of Montreal is to be understood as the medium, as you note in the book, what function does Montreal serve in relation to eroticism when compared to the rest of Canada? In what ways is it unique, and why?

Matthew Purvis: The erotic art that developed in Montreal was substantially different from that which contemporaneously existed in Toronto or London, for example. There were numerous reasons for this. Among them was the province's relationship to French surrealism, which placed a fairly specific set of notions about eroticism at its centre, particularly as conceptualized by André Breton and Georges Bataille.

Another was the city's commercial sex milieu, alongside which much of its art evolved. Both developed out of the Duplessis era, which, despite its repressive reputation, had allowed for a world-renowned red-light district and burlesque scene, most of which was eroded or erased by the Quiet Revolution and

liberal reform. Both regimes were very mixed bags for anyone interested in eroticism and played roles in influencing how it could be publicly articulated. The easing of censorship restrictions in the late sixties, for instance, contributed to the boom in the production of sex films (*films de fesses*), which was foundational in establishing a commercially viable feature film industry in the province.



mRb: As a born-and-raised Montrealer, I was unfamiliar with the genre of *ti-pop* you identify in the book. This may be because I am bilingual – an anglophone with francophone tendencies – but could you offer readers a brief introduction to the concept?

MP: *Ti-pop* is a term coined by Pierre Maheu and Pierre Théberge to describe what a specifically Québécois pop art would be. It was an under-theorized term, but one that generally indicated a deliberately paradoxical sense of intimate distance or affectionate alienation toward the material sensibility of the Duplessis era and its aftermath. The term was taken up more broadly in the press and given a wide array of meanings, but it tended to suggest a low-class or outmoded sensibility. It was used to describe things as varied as communist utopian fantasies,

cheap Catholic folk art, the work of Jacques Godbout, the symbolic value of Pepsi, nightclub decor, or the films of Jean Pierre Lefebvre.

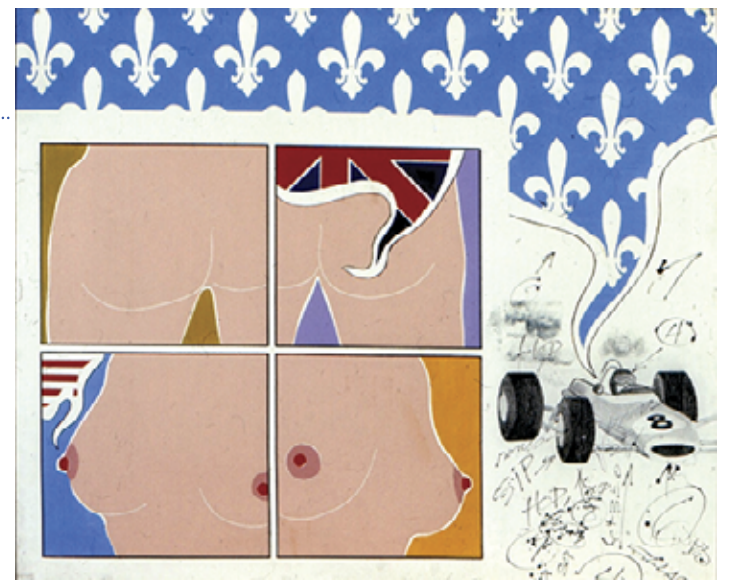
mRb: You discuss the rise of “girl-watching” that took shape downtown, particularly around Place Ville-Marie, and the role the miniskirt played in this development. Could you elaborate further on this phenomenon, and comment on the ways in which voyeurism did – or did not – play a role in this performance?

MP: Girl-watching was a practice found in urban environments across North America. Basically, it meant that men, either singly or in clubs, would go to different areas and watch and photograph women they expected would be scantily clad in the latest fashions. In Montreal, it reached a kind of crescendo during the Expo period as the city was swamped with tourists. Locally, the emergence of girl-watching more or less coincided with the decline of burlesque. If downtown became a free catwalk, the burlesque house seemed antiquated.

A variety of other voyeuristic and exhibitionistic practices emerged at the time, including the development of exotic dancing, erotic discos, and the fad for topless restaurants. Some of these fads morphed and lived on. Until a few months ago, you could still be served breakfast by waitresses in lingerie at Les Coquines Resto-Sexy on Hochelaga.

mRb: In your conclusion, you write, “While the extensive history of contemporary art in the city, as an institution and practice, relies on intentionality and the presumption of the sociocultural construction of meaning, I have attempted to stress a rival development of the same underlying themes, one not in line with the utility of the institutions but the inutility of the erotic.” What do you mean by this inutility of the erotic?

MP: Controversies around eroticism in



Gilles Boisvert, *Québec libre*, 1969. Acrylic and transfer on canvas, 167.6 x 182.9 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



The Pornographic Delicatessen
Midcentury Montréal's Erotic Art,
Media, and Spaces
Matthew Purvis
Concordia University Press
\$59.95, paperback, 440pp
9781988111599

the period had less to do with sexual content in itself than with whether it could be socially redeemed. The drive to create contemporary art in the city, which included different levels of government and some arts groups, teachers, critics, etc., tended to be rationalized in terms of the professionalization and socialization of art. Art was supposed to have a redemptive function, whether as a type of pedagogy or the symbolic expression of community.

mRb: It sounds like the debates weren't really about sex itself. They were more about whether that kind of art could be justified or made respectable. City officials, governments, and art-world people wanted to build a serious contemporary art scene, and art was expected to “do good” – to teach, improve people, or represent shared community values – rather than just exist for pleasure or provocation. Is that right?

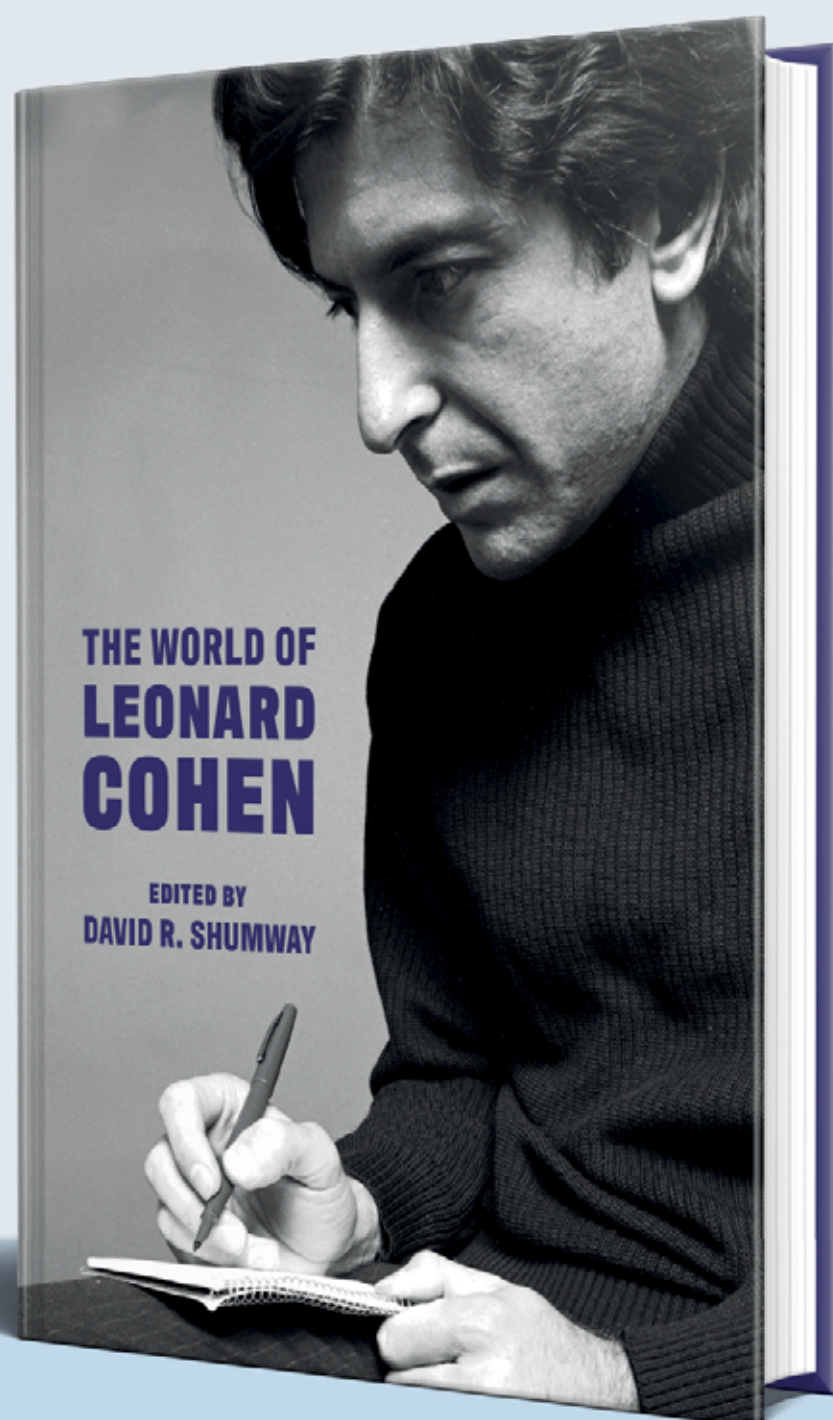
MP: Yes, these are still the normative frames commonly employed by institutions like the MAC and UQÀM. But most of how eroticism was conceived at the time, largely thanks to the legacy of surrealism, was as something that radically undermined conscious meaning and use value, and which demeaned the credibility of social representation and significance.

mRb: I found the section on *Gai-Kébec* particularly illuminating, especially in noting the significance Montreal held during the rise of Queer movements, particularly as a proxy for our American neighbours. You explore this topic through the erotic press and specific

continued on page 18

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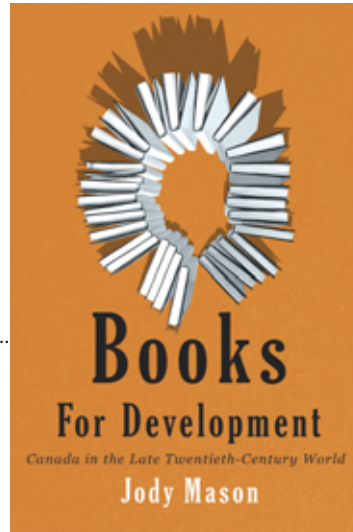
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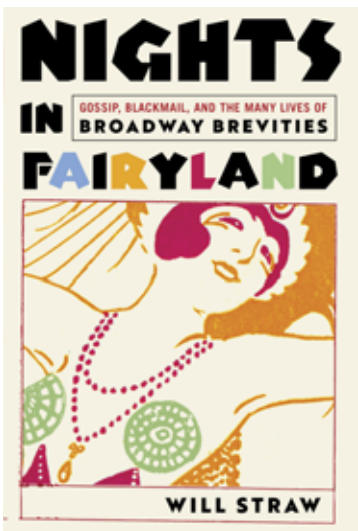
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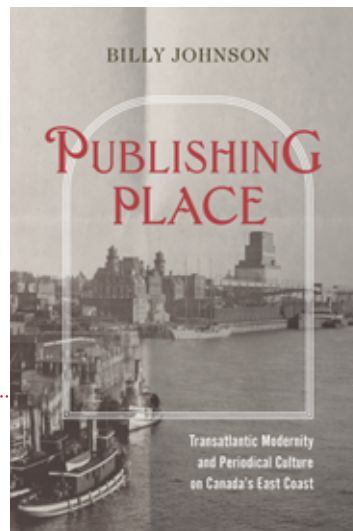
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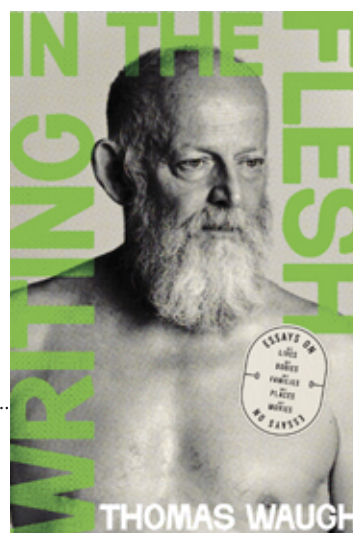
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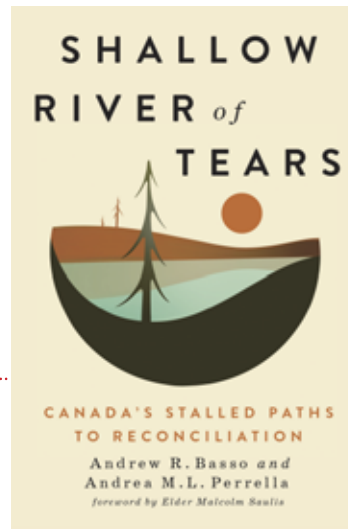
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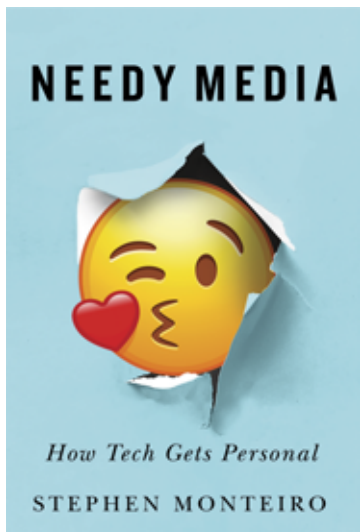
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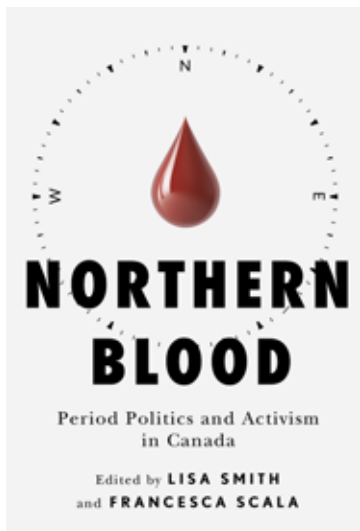
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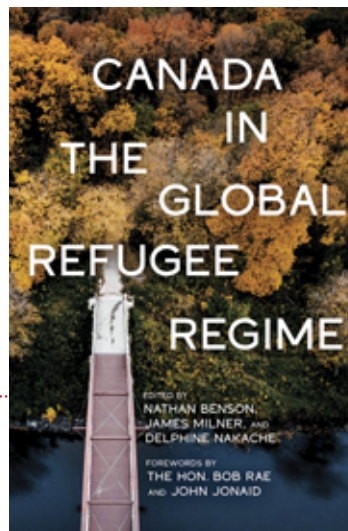
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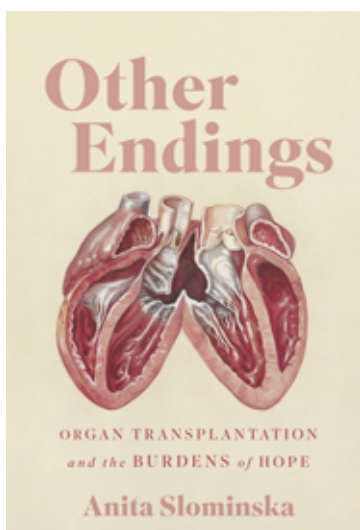
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Cannibal Rats

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Governor General's Award-winner Richard Greene's remarkable new poetry collection, *Cannibal Rats*, is rich with searing wisdom, complicated grace, and magisterial craft, reporting from locales as disparate as the Civil War battlefields of America and the storm-worn shores of Newfoundland. Greene bears witness to historical injustices, meditates on how "art and memory unravel" under the auspices of mortality, and wrestles with the loss of a beloved mother.



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Morgan's Castle

Jan Hilliard

First published in 1964, *Morgan's Castle* combines family secrets and black humour of the darkest kind. This Ricochet Books edition—#19 in the vintage Canadian noir series edited by Brian Busby—marks the first new edition in nearly fifty years. Jan Hilliard was the pen name of Hilda Kay Grant (1910–1996), born and raised in Nova Scotia. Her first book, *The Salt Box* (1951), loosely based on her childhood, was awarded a Stephen Leacock Medal.



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PURVIS continued from page 14

publications; if print is dead, is Montreal's erotic print also dead?

MP: More broadly, this question points to something else that distinguished Quebec from the rest of Canada. The province possessed a comparatively rich market for local tabloids and yellow press, which spanned from scandal sheets to pornography, straight, gay, and so on. There were cheap and more luxurious variations of this, and they overlapped in interesting ways with the counterculture press in the city. They also overlapped, in

theme and content, with the trend for affordable prints and art books that emerged when artists were targeting a wider consumer base. This hasn't gone away. Artists still make erotic prints and paintings, and Montreal is a significant centre for pornography, if more substantially on the business end. **mb**

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

non-fiction

Laughter and Loss

How to Move On

An Unfinished Memoir of Loss, Love, and Surviving Your Family

Joel Yanofsky

Véhicule Press

\$19.95, paperback, 200pp

9781550656930

Montreal author Joel Yanofsky's memoir, *How to Move On: An Unfinished Memoir of Loss, Love, and Surviving Your Family*, was originally meant to read like a "how to" guide, but it became something slightly different. Published posthumously, the memoir still provides a sense of closure despite being unfinished upon Yanofsky's passing, with his wife Cynthia Davis and his friend (and editor) Bryan Demchinsky piecing together the remainder of the book and enclosing within it their respective preface and introduction.

A meta-narrative structure of storytelling frames Yanofsky's book as he talks about his career as an author, as well as a teacher, a freelance writer, and a book reviewer, though this is not merely

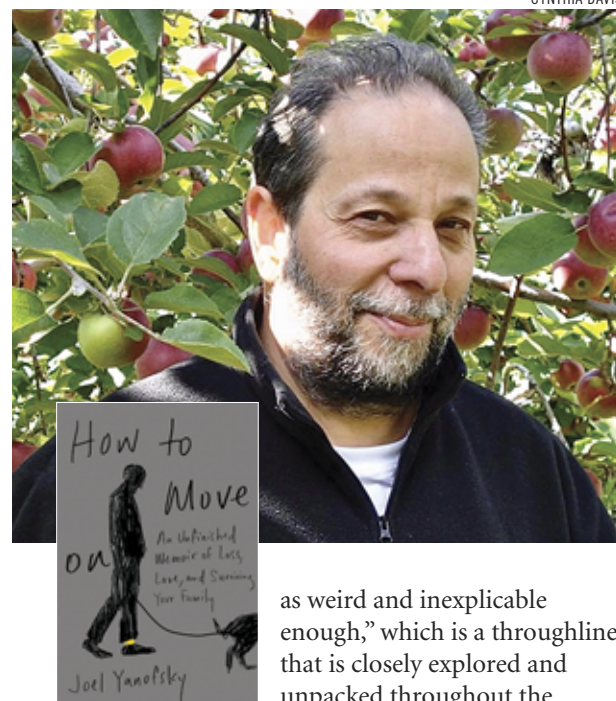
a book for writers: it's for anyone who is willing to explore the human condition, with all of its curious idiosyncrasies. The story opens with a Yanofsky family walk – with the author, his wife, and their son Jonah – providing a glimpse into one COVID-19 bubble during a time of worldwide panic and uncertainty.

At that time, the author himself was grappling with his own troubling health issues, separate from the coronavirus, while he and his wife continued to provide for their adult, autistic son, whom Yanofsky has written about more extensively in another memoir called *Bad Animals: A Father's Accidental Education in Autism*. As *How to Move On* travels back and forth through Yanofsky's past and present, the deaths of loved ones circulate nearby, wildly and unexpectedly, much like the pandemic itself, and Yanofsky reflects upon loss after loss, as well as the deepening insight each one would eventually bring.

It is important to note that this memoir is not meant to be judged by its cover, nor its title, because more often than not, it is laugh-out-loud funny. From a badly behaved, and self-entitled,

pet dog named "Harvey Weinstein" to an ambiguous family recipe that instructs: "1. Olive oil, loads of garlic. 2. Throw in tomatoes. 3. Tomato paste 4. Then add the meat and a dash of sugar 5. Simmer for hours," to the author's shameless self-promotion on his own gravestone, which reads: "I wrote a few pretty good books, consider this a plug," there is no shortage of laughter in the face of the book's more serious subject matter. Other topics in the memoir include intergenerational trauma, disability (both visible and invisible), sticking together amidst betrayal, and of course, the memoir's main themes: death and grief, but specifically, an exploration of these in a cumulative context.

Wonderfully and thoroughly Montreal, Yanofsky's memoir also delves into the nuances of Jewish identity, growing up middle class in the suburbs of Laval, the balancing act of being an artist with making a living, and all of the beautiful and complicated interpersonal relationships that develop in between. He writes: "I have never been a fan of fantasy or science fiction. The actual things that happen in people's lives, in my life and that of my family, have always struck me



as weird and inexplicable enough," which is a throughline that is closely explored and unpacked throughout the memoir. Yanofsky's writing is candid, cheeky, and empathetic, and he is unafraid to lean into his innermost fears as equally as he softens those very anxieties with humour.

Overall, while *How to Move On* did not become the exact "how to" manual it was originally meant to be, it still manages to deliver on its original intent, by prescribing a healthy dose of medicinal laughter, and a deep appreciation for the people and things that matter in life and make it worth living. **mb**

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.

Conscious Uncoupling

Into the Loop

An Ethnography of Compulsive Repetition

Samuele Collu

Duke University Press

\$31.95, paperback, 224pp

9781478032946

Remember the last argument you had with your significant other? Perhaps the argument had a kind of loopy quality to it, in the sense that you just kept going "round and round" in circles. If you haven't had that experience personally, you may have witnessed a friend or loved one get into it. That's the jumping off point of *Into the Loop: An Ethnography of Compulsive Repetition*.

McGill anthropologist Samuele Collu dives into the psychic void at the heart of these loops that pattern our love lives, inviting readers along for a playful and heartfelt ride. Be warned: this is not a self-help book for couples (although there are small assignments for readers sprinkled throughout).

Into the Loop is based on research Collu conducted in Argentina, studying the peculiar practice of couple systemic therapy. In this practice, a team of psychotherapists watches an otherwise ordinary couple therapy session, either from behind a two-way mirror or through a closed-circuit live feed in another room (sometimes both). Immersed among psychotherapists, amid hundreds of hours of couple therapy sessions, Collu the anthropologist asks, "how and under which conditions can we interrupt the loops that define us?"

Collu proposes that the social (and psychic) fabric of the couple itself – two people fallen helplessly in love –

is one such loop in which modern folks are trapped. While *Into the Loop* isn't a full-blown deconstruction of the couple, it's clear Collu isn't optimistic about this form of love. In fact, he leans into Lauren Berlant's concept of *cruel optimism* to diagnose a kind of collective disordered attachment to its wishful illusions. The cruel optimism of romance locks people into an "infernal embrace" of "never-fully-collapsing relationships" that ultimately drain their vitality. The question returns: how to interrupt this embrace?

Collu is not only after "the couple." Adeptly woven into this conversation is another about similarly disordered attachments to screens and "algorithmic forms of governance." In a chapter titled "Compulsive Repetitions," he writes: "Humans have the biocultural tendency and evolutionary necessity to predict, anticipate, and delimit the realm of possibilities around them... I crave the comfort of something predictable, something that I can binge for extended stretches of time, something that could potentially never stop." Algorithmic feeds, similar to well-trod relational loops, nourish a human weakness for familiarity.

Each of the book's four chapters has the feeling of a montage: scenes from real couples fighting, therapeutic interventions, theoretical lenses from psychoanalysis and post-structuralism, and Collu's own personal musings. Collu often interrupts himself: beginning with



one image or perspective before suddenly shifting to a new angle. Yet many images return, ideas riff, in a dreamlike syncopation. Collu dips and dives through the wonderland of the collective subconscious armed with, as he puts it, "the fuzzy warmth of a question one asks just before falling asleep."

Collu gestures toward possible technologies for interrupting and liberating us from heteronormative and digital trances. For example, he summons "the spirit of the situationist interruption" – referring to the European political performance art movement that began in the 1950s – as a tool for collective transformation. He calls for help in imagining "a collective practice that slowly erodes the

dominant presence of some images over others."

Collu's gesturing sometimes feels frustratingly vague and lost in a conceptual register. I could also nag about the moments when I thought Collu was too soft on romantic delusions, or a bit too bashful in making it clear to the reader that he's not immune to such delusions. However, I see Collu's overall approach as a well-placed refusal to fall into the loop of being too prescriptive or preachy. In the end, I'm struck by how Collu manages to balance a rare kind of vulnerability on the page, standing right alongside the reader as we gaze into the collective mirror. **mb**

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

The Book of Memory and Forgetting

Before We Forget
How Remembering Will Get Us Through
the Next 75 Years
Mary Soderstrom
Dundurn Press
\$26.99, paperback, 248pp
9781459755857

We live in calamitous times: wildfires run rampant, wars proliferate, rising seas threaten to swallow shores and devastate coastal populations. And if the tenor of contemporary politics is anything to go by, the world's leaders won't be prepared to solve these problems any time soon. Things are likely to get worse, much worse, before they get better. How can we cope?

In *Before We Forget*, Mary Soderstrom makes the case that what we'll need to weather the storm are our memories. By this, she means not just our individual memories but also our collective ones: our history and shared stories, as well as the vast repositories of information stored in libraries, in archives, and on the World Wide Web. If we are to survive the challenges of the twenty-first century, she argues, we'll need all the knowledge we can gather from our forebears, as well as the know-how to safeguard it from destruction and to share it with our descendants.

It's a compelling argument, made all the more so by Soderstrom's skillful storytelling and engaging, accessible style. The first section of the book presents an overview of memory as Soderstrom conceives of it. We learn how the brain develops and stores memories. We learn about the history of libraries and how they, along with archives and the internet, have evolved to be the great storehouses of humans' "collective memories." We also learn how our memories can fail us and explore how some – such as autocrats who actively spread disinformation – try to manipulate others' memories for their own gain. Throughout, Soderstrom interweaves fascinating tidbits from science and history, as well as reflections on her own life, which offer a thematic throughline and a welcome emotional depth.

The book's middle section turns to three case studies – China, Rome, and the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island – to show how past cultures have faced societal collapse, yet maintained (or resurrected) their heritage. The breadth of the research here is impressive, and these chapters make for some of the book's most scintillating moments, even if Soderstrom gets the occasional fact wrong. (Julius Caesar was hardly the first dictator of the



Roman Republic, and *res publica*, from which the word "republic" comes, can be better translated as "the public thing" than "property of the people.") At times, Soderstrom shows a penchant for citing some rather heterodox thinkers to support her assertions. The most notable example is Peter Turchin, who's something of a modern-day Nostradamus: Through the study of what he calls "cliodynamics," he claims to be able to predict the future by analyzing statistical information from historical societies, however unreliable those statistics may be the further back in time one goes.

In the book's final section, Soderstrom examines what she considers to be the three great challenges of the twenty-first century: "climate change, war and civil conflict, and artificial intelligence." Whether the three are of equal menace is still to be seen, but Soderstrom convincingly argues that they are not only global but also deeply intertwined threats, feeding and reinforcing each other.

The last chapter provides a brief overview of what Soderstrom considers vital to remember. The list is surprisingly modest and includes such skills as digging a latrine, mending clothes, writing, and playing a musical instrument. If this seems bleak, that's because it is. Her vision of the future is one where little is certain, where familiar comforts like electricity or indoor plumbing have vanished or, at best, are no longer guaranteed. It's a future where, frankly, we've lost.

But perhaps there's still a future worth fighting for. Perhaps we can ask for more than mere survival – and for that, we'll need more than memories. After all, as Soderstrom acknowledges, our memories can lead us astray, especially as the internet swells with disinformation fuelled by artificial intelligence. Knowledge is only half the battle. Wisdom, critical thinking, the political will and courage to act: if we're to turn things around, we'll need those, too, along with the vision and verve to dream up solutions to our present-day problems. **mb**

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

Re-Rooting in New Soil

NAIRA SANTANA

Native Immigrant
A Personal Journey into Our Home
and Native Land
Carolina Echeverría
Agapé Books
\$26.95, paperback, 200pp
9781069636805

In *Native Immigrant: A Personal Journey into Our Home and Native Land*, visual artist-turned-writer Carolina Echeverría interweaves personal memoir with cultural reflections on identity, place, and relationality. With a candid, almost journal-like intimacy, Echeverría invites us into her life, tracing her journey from a childhood in Chile to her eventual immigration to Montreal. Throughout the book, her writing is marked by honesty and vulnerability, even when recounting personal moments that reveal her as imperfect and deeply human. In no way does her writing shy away from the complexities of her own humanity or that of others.

Echeverría's memoir traces a recurring thread of finding connection in unsuspecting places, and the impact these relationships have had on her sense of personhood and belonging. Shaped in her early years by her father's abandonment and a fraught relationship with her mother, she comes to learn that kinship can stretch far beyond bloodlines, beyond birthplace. This exploration underpins the entirety of her memoir: a continuous search for home, for a place to plant her roots and tend to them. The emergence of these cross-cultural friendships become the backbone of her life's story, shaping how she comes to understand her place in the world.

Echeverría's friendship and conversations with Mohawk War Chief Ateronhiatakon (Francis Boots) frame the entirety of her memoir – taking up what it means to re-root in a new place. Beyond this, she also delves into other formative relationships: finding a sense of community with her host family during an exchange in the US and falling in love with her now-husband Alain during a trip to Puerto Vallarta. Her memoir drives home that we are not formed in isolation, but rather are the product of our relationships – the people we choose to love. In our rather polarizing political climate, there is nothing more important than bridging cross-cultural divides and finding places where we can meet each other.

Echeverría reflects on the singular challenge of packing one's life into a suitcase, knowing that "whatever you bring will represent the life you left behind," while exploring the



emotional and cultural weight carried across borders. Among the most compelling aspects of Echeverría's book are her perceptive and nuanced reflections on religion, gender, and political resistance. While exploring these topics, she never distances the reader from her story, but instead keeps us present in her life.

While serious in undertone and topic, Echeverría's meditations on religion bring forward levity and humour, offering the reader a clear sense of her voice. I broke into laughter as she referred to God as "the super-landlord" and likened Noah from the ark to Al Gore, Naomi Klein, and David Suzuki in that "[n]obody cared back then either." She brings contemporary understandings to long-held ideas about Catholicism, making them genuinely engaging and unexpectedly funny. Throughout her writing, bodily autonomy and resistance also recur: she frames controlling her own sexuality as her first anti-patriarchal act and recounts holding mirrors to soldiers' eyes as a child, directing beams of sunlight into them – small, defiant acts of resistance that highlight her inventive, rebellious spirit. Throughout the book, Echeverría does an artful job of providing the reader with precise details from her life that show us who she is and brings her story to life off the page.

If you're looking for an honest exploration of self-discovery and belonging, set against the cultural backdrops of Chile and Canada, this memoir is it. Echeverría brings you into her story, surprising with her sharp insights, emotional sensibility, and depth of character. **mb**

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

Reaching Towards an Essential Spirit

Return to Damascus
A Personal Journey
Jonathan Sa'adah
Phoenicia Publishing
\$39.50, paperback, 172pp
9781927496213

Jonathan Sa'adah's new photobook, *Return to Damascus: A Personal Journey*, was compiled during a two-week expedition to Syria with his then ninety-year-old father, Mounir Sa'adah, who'd originally left the city in 1928. Each of the book's four sections is accompanied by a text that describes a country in flux, peeling back layers of Sa'adah's Christian family history, tracing the cycles of ethnic and religious conflict (and co-existence) that have marked the region for centuries. When you open *Return*, you are greeted by photos of bustling street scenes spilling over with Damascenes going about their day-to-day. It's difficult to gauge when the images might have been taken, because Sa'adah shot on black-and-white film; a glance at the back cover reveals the book documents a Damascus from the year 2000. This is the book's first gesture of *reaching back*.

Section one, the eponymous "Return to Damascus: A Personal Journey," recounts Jonathan and his father's travels, detailing the "mingled scents of cardamom, exhaust fumes, and jasmine" that characterized

Damascus' Old City, with its Ottoman-era mosque complexes and historical Jewish, Christian, and Muslim quarters. We also see the city through Mounir Sa'adah's memory, as he recounts "a city where change and permanence coexist," and where orchards of the past have disappeared and made way for the city's relentless spread. This exemplifies another *reaching back*, towards a Damascus that existed just after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

Horizontal spreads portray the organized chaos of Damascus street life. A boy runs across the edge of the frame. Street-side bakeries, crowded newspaper kiosks, and lively shop scenes keep time with the rhythm of life. Light dapples the corridors of ancient souks and minarets puncture the horizon line, while political propaganda posters and exposed rebar hint at the tensions that simmer just beneath the surface.

The second section, "The Crescent Protects the Cross," constitutes a further historical *reaching back*, shifting to an account of sectarian violence that broke out in Syria in the 1860s between Druze, Muslim, and Christian communities. Sa'adah honours the Algerian revolutionary, Abd el-Qadir, for defending the Damascene Christian community at the time, crediting him with saving his own family, and revering him as "a universal

symbol of humanitarian values and interfaith solidarity." The photos in this section depict scenes of interfaith reality: women pass through the frame wearing hijab, niqab, or no head covering whatsoever. Neighbourhood men play a raucous game of street soccer. Sheets hang in an empty courtyard. A toddler waddles across the wide sahn of Umayyad Mosque. The work here also takes on a more personal dimension, with photos of Mounir Sa'adah in a Christian church and at the family tomb.

"Out to the Qalamoun," the third section, outlines their journey beyond Damascus to Ma'lula and Seidnaya, *reaching back* further to ancient Christian villages where the inhabitants still speak Western Neo-Aramaic, the language of Jesus Christ. Sa'adah again emphasizes the history of religious coexistence in the region, where both Muslims and Christians share Aramaic identity and the divine appreciation for the same Christian iconography. The photos here depict biblical landscapes, homes stacked like building blocks against cliffsides, ancient Christian caves, and expansive views of Our Lady of Seidnaya monastery backed by modern concrete construction in the village beyond.

In "Returning to the Heart of Memory," Sa'adah closes the book with personal reflections on his journey. His father's



Damascus has become unrecognizable to him in many ways, yet there is an "essential spirit" that carries across generations. Sa'adah shares his faith in our capacity to transcend religious intolerance, and embrace the "complex mutual recognition of the sacred," while expressing his concern for the delicate balance in the region. (As we know, chaos and violence would return to Damascus with the Syrian Civil War in 2013.) The final photo in the book – a lone olive tree standing defiantly in a desert landscape – communicates this "essential spirit" better than any words. For Sa'adah this has not only been a journey towards personal identity, but also a *reaching back*, towards something greater within all of us. **mb**

Dean Garlick is a photographer and fiction writer living in Montreal.

Messages Unbottled

Letters from the Afterlife
The Post-Holocaust Correspondence of
Chava Rosenfarb and Zenia Larsson
Edited by Goldie Morgentaler
Translated by Krzysztof Majer and Sylvia Söderlind
McGill-Queen's University Press
\$39.95, paperback, 328pp
9780228024668



Despite the harsh conditions of their daily life, two young women show a fierce determination to live their lives as artists. They begin a correspondence sharing their yearnings, the many obstacles they face, the few moments of fulfillment. Because both women will become writers, their accounts are vivid, sometimes heartbreaking. But what makes this exchange especially affecting is that the letters start soon after the liberation of the two friends from Bergen-Belsen in 1945.

Chava Rosenfarb and Zenia Marcinkowska became friends in the Lodz ghetto, and remained together through their time in Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. While Chava survived in the company of her mother and her sister, and soon after reunited with her future husband, Henry Morgentaler, Zenia lost everyone. Despite the years spent in close companionship with Chava and her family, Zenia chose to set out on her own to Sweden.

The photos on the cover of the book, taken soon after the liberation from Auschwitz, show two young women confronting the future. Chava stares fiercely at the camera, her gaze dark, her lips tight. Zenia looks to the side, her face soft and dreamy, but with something like bitterness around her mouth. Both women are twenty-three years old, on the cusp of new lives. For the next thirty years, they will exchange letters written in their only shared language, Polish.

different languages, and initially without being aware of the other's project.

Goldie Morgentaler, the editor of this book and the dedicated, intelligent, guardian of her mother's legacy, refers to the complexity of women's lives lived in the "afterlife" of the Holocaust. The letters have much to say about the painful contradictions of the postwar period. Mixed with sadness, loneliness, and guilt are the immediate needs of learning a new language and adapting to the rules of a new country. There are anxious inquiries about friends and relatives who may or may not have survived. There are plans to meet, constantly frustrated by lack of money. And there is the shocking disconnect between the suffering of the war years and the attitudes of the established Jewish community.

The voice of Chava in her letters will be recognizable to readers of her novels (*The Tree of Life*, *Bociany*, *Of Lodz and Love*), short stories (*Survivors*), poetry (*Exile at Last*) and essays (*Confessions of a Yiddish Writer*) – the same commitment to honesty, the same respect for emotions, whether they be socially appropriate or not. Relations between the two friends become strained at times, and Zenia is silent for long periods. Chava is the more persistent writer, more determined to keep the friendship alive and meaningful, yet she goes through sterile periods in her writing: "I hate words. Every word I use seems

Their ambitions will see success. Chava will become a leading member of the Yiddish language literary community in Montreal and later an internationally known writer in English translation. Zenia will become a sculptor and, for a time, a wildly successful Swedish-language writer. Both women will write trilogies devoted to the ghetto and war experiences – though they will do so at different times, in

threadbare, rotten, stale." Zenia struggles with wood and stone, often totally absorbed by it. They talk little of the past, and Zenia admits how difficult it is to bring up the subject, even to her best friend Chava. Only when she is sitting at her typewriter, "using language as a scalpel," do her hesitations disappear. Both are possessed by the need to create. In her valuable introduction, Goldie Morgentaler reminds readers that, for survivors like Zenia and Chava, creativity was crucial as a way of exorcising and coming to terms with the past.

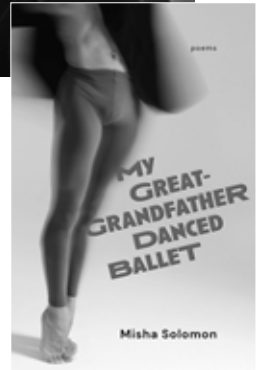
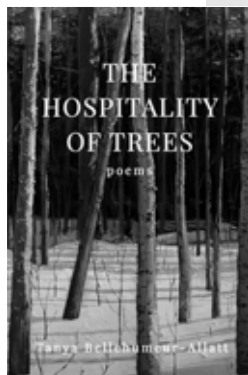
The translators show strong empathy for their authors, recreating the candour, fervour, and lyricism of their language. They have shaped the dialogue to convey a sense of immediacy. The reader feels very much in the presence of two strong-willed yet vulnerable women, writing their secrets and their doubts into the vast space that separates them. And then acknowledging with joy that they have been heard.

The letters continued until 1996; Zenia died in 2007, Chava in 2011. There is no overt rivalry between the friends as they congratulate each other on the various successes they achieved. Zenia won the more spectacular recognition for the first volume of her trilogy, the first published Holocaust testimony in Sweden. Because Chava lived almost exclusively within the community of Yiddish-language writers, her fame was more circumscribed. Over the years, however, the balance has shifted. While Zenia's star has dimmed, Chava has been receiving increasing recognition in translation: 2023 was declared the international year of Chava Rosenfarb in her home city of Lodz, Poland, with a street named in her honour. Translation, then, continues to set words in movement, and there may yet be new turns in the story. **mb**

Sherry Simon is Distinguished Professor Emerita, Concordia University. She is the author of *Translating Montreal*, and most recently of *Translation Sites: A Field Guide*, which has been translated into several languages. She is a member of the Académie des lettres du Québec.

poetry

JEAN-PIERRE DENAULT

**The Hand of the Hand**

Laura Vazquez

Translated by Shira Abramovich

and Lénaïg Cariou

Ugly Duckling Presse

\$27.31, paperback, 128pp

9781946604453

When I was a little girl, I would go to my neighbours', also little girls, living by a creek, to catch frogs. We would play with them, make them kiss, and, at the end of the day, feed them, whole, to the sunfish. Weirdly, I was reminded of this ritual sacrifice reading Laura Vazquez's poetry, where innocent communion with nature is always underpinned by some unspoken violence. Here, mouths are home for wasps, lashes live underground, and "we sense the taste of blood / in glasses of water," "like / drinking the viscous / and scented liquid / through a straw."

Vazquez paints with a muted palette, so that a word like blood or even "strawberry" almost audibly pops. Her word choices are otherwise simple: night, trees, hands, "objects." Their anti-specificity gives the poems their epic feel; they could be set in any time (one of the only giveaways that we are in the contemporary period involves an amazing image about noticing someone's pierced nape).

Elsewhere, Vazquez's language is governed by an unusual, almost surreal logic: "I set down a pot of honey, it is night on the table"; "I will have to walk a big kilometer." The effect is one of a secret code, or a child's

invented language. If that seems silly, it's not, partly because of the poems' restraint, and partly because of their real tactile beauty. The line "I see my eyes in dirty water" is like some of the best lines of Eliot, as ancient as it is prophetic.

Indeed, if there is menace in Vazquez's poems, it is always accompanied with tenderness, one signalled by a desire to become one with the material world. Over the course of the collection, eyes, hands, sky, and earth repeatedly consume and inhabit one another. Perhaps this tension between communion and oblivion should have been tipped off by the collection's epigraph, a quote from Clarice Lispector: "If I look at an object too long, I explode." This is a collection that alights with each reading, whose pleasures, however violent, afford something like the experience of being totally consumed: "Then, / I lay down / And the night had nothing to say."

The Hospitality of Trees

Tanya Bellehumeur-Allat

Shoreline Press

\$19.95, paperback, 88pp

9781926953915

"Today you fell asleep in the car / holding the roses" is one of a handful of unadorned observations in Tanya Bellehumeur-Allat's new book of poems, striking as much for its beauty as its simplicity. Another one: "All day it's been Easter." Days are where we live, Larkin said, and this seems especially true in

Bellehumeur-Allat's poems, where every snowy morning presents an opportunity to resurrect life anew.

These are poems about the surfaces of that life, a life in a home on a lake, filled with parents and blueberry pancakes, driving lessons and domestic squabbles. Paddling in Maine in summer, cross-country skiing in winter. Bellehumeur-Allat is alert to the household's rhythms and rituals, the closet with "those haphazard ties, / piled up purses," and "poems before breakfast / before Spanish homework." Closer to home, in the village diner, "car truths converge."

These are sentimental poems, yes, but the best ones recognize these truths owe something to the mystery beyond, or exist somewhere between the surface and the subterranean: "They say / there are pike nine feet long, as big as sharks / living there, in the eternal dark."

My Great-Grandfather Danced Ballet

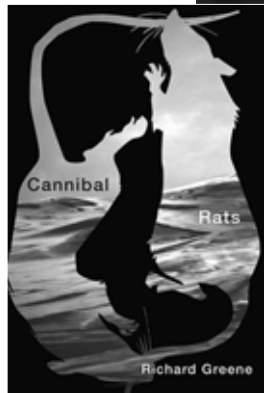
Misha Solomon

Brick Books

\$23.95, paperback, 132pp

9781771316675

One poem in Misha Solomon's *My Great-Grandfather Danced Ballet* ventriloquizes a Jewish comedian doing a stand-up skit in a Catskills resort: "I kid! I joke! I josh! I'm bored —." This exclamation maps onto the experience of reading this collection, which yo-yos from the profane to the mundane and back again. At one point the speaker admits to googling "old-fashioned word for semen" to improve his poems'



LINDA KOOLURIS DOBBS



historical accuracy (“I’m trying, I really am, to do this research thing,” he writes). Its fast-paced dialogue and witty asides conjure a speaker both overly confident and anxious about his work’s reception: “Do these poems convey that I am, at my core, a good person?”

But underneath the speaker’s self-proclaimed “millennial irony” is a sincere longing for connection. The collection is named for a fictionalized version of Solomon’s great-grandfather, who danced ballet in pre-Holocaust Romania. In a moment of formal daring, Solomon intersperses reflections about coming into his queerness with letters his great-grandfather, later settled in Montreal, might have written to his would-be lover, Rubin.

Compared to his great-grandfather, the poems’ speaker has been less fettered by material suffering, and enjoys a domestic partnership complete with engagement rings, matching IKEA plates, a dog, an apartment, time to think and write poems. On the other hand, this leisure time is also what allows him to stare into the abyss of his deepest problems. For all its campiness, Solomon’s poetry is also touched by diasporic trauma, loss, and yearning. Solomon is smart to give Rubin the last lines, allowing that loss and yearning to take on a life of its own: “dear reader ... I don’t believe in you / I choose to live beyond these pages I / decide that I survived.”

Cannibal Rats
Richard Greene
Signal Editions
\$19.95, paperback, 104pp
9781550656992

Are there any two words in the English language more beautiful than “cannibal rats”? Possibly, but Richard Greene gives them a run for their money. The titular rats are living on a ship off the coast of Ireland when they are discovered by a local newspaper, after which they “joined all that history of drowned fleets /

without song or poem but a million tweets.” For a poem about rodents that eat each other, it has a real sense of grace, and humour so subtle you might blink and miss it.

Throughout the collection, Greene, a St. John’s native now living in Toronto, observes various scenes of wreckage, always remaining at a slight remove (“Off Lampedusa this week,” he writes, “two boats capsized, / sixty saved, twenty-seven lost.”). His journeys take him from Sicily to Gettysburg to Toronto, although they are always shot through with Newfoundland (no one ever leaves Newfoundland for Ontario without hearing something about it). He fends off uncritical nostalgia:

Revenant myself, I may not cavil
about how art and memory unravel,
followed my chances on the mainland,
got tenure, found the taxpayers’ open hand,
and am now a Jonah where I was born
confused by both the fog and the foghorn;
returning to my peculiar Nineveh,
I have no message: I’ve just been away.

These poems are not anxious about what they need to say, and because of that Greene is able to invest in the big picture, nurturing a single sentence over several lines. That also means the one-liners really pop: “I watch the weather losing heart.” Other rhymes wink: “eighty-nine / morphine,” “desperate / New York State.”

At another point, teaching his students, Greene observes, “They knew nothing then of Bogey or Ingrid, / of having Paris or ‘looking at you kid.’” If the sum total of *Casablanca*’s clichés actually made it a perfect movie, harkening it to a golden age of cinema, so too do Greene’s poetic conceits – couplets of eleven syllables, shipwrecks, journeys home – harken his work to a golden age of poetry. Only a few times does he reveal he is not so sure about ability to recall these things with one hundred per cent accuracy: “You were, I think, prisoner of memory,” “this vividness unexplained.”

all the time
Xiaoxuan Huang
Metatron Press
\$20, paperback, 144pp
9781988355764

The papyrus is a fragile terrain, susceptible to loss through weather and age. Huang’s collection is on a papyrus for the time being, where gaps appear less by disintegration than by degradations of memory. The square brackets which punctuate this collection read like an elegy for what is lost to time and may “never [appear] as such.” It’s no coincidence the collection’s dates range throughout and beyond the shelter in place orders brought on by COVID-19 – a poem set in early 2020 reads like a laundry list of forgotten pre-pandemic pleasures:

I watch the clock
placing my hands on you everywhere
...
I go to a lot of parties
hoping I’ll see you there
often what I remember
the next day
is [
] all the people
outside [] smoking
...
someone offers me a drag

Other 2020 events you might have forgotten: widespread wildfires, a poem that relays the heat of early romance “under the smoked-out sun.” Through Huang’s eyes, these memories and fragments, though erased on the page, live on in the atmosphere, in the evaporated substance of history. mrb

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

By Madelaine Caritas Longman

Alexei Perry Cox

What Has Been Taken Out

When we meet for our interview, Alexei Perry Cox has just returned from visiting loved ones in Venezuela, a trip which coincided with the American military strike and capture of the incumbent Venezuelan president. Until the last moment, neither of us were certain whether her flight would be permitted to return to Canada. As she Zooms in for our conversation from her sunny Montreal office, a charge crackles in the air. Through the digital interface, Perry Cox's passion, openness, and commitment to empathy vibrate – as do the pain and uncertainty of our global moment.

This same affective electricity pulses through and off every page of *[SPACE]*. A quantum entanglement of love and grief, Perry Cox's deeply political project accumulates language from books by contemporary Palestinian and Indigenous Turtle Island poets writing in English, arranging each work's phrases into a prose poem. "These are lines gathered from specific collections that I love with all my heart," she says. But, she adds, she also wanted "to complicate that gathering of love by talking about how strange it is to gather it all."

[SPACE] seeks not only to honour its sources and their intertextual resonances but to interrogate the extractivist nature of such scholarship, reckoning with our responsibilities as readers, writers, and inhabitants of lands. Perry Cox, who "live[s], writ[es], and work[s] between SWANA [Southwest Asia and North Africa] region and Turtle Island," emphasizes that she is not setting out to speak for these communities, nor to advocate for a specific response to ongoing colonial violence. Rather, *[SPACE]* arises out of concern for the imperfection yet necessity of allyship. During times of "heartbreaking [and] unconscionable violence," she says, whether one is reading poetry or watching the news, one must pay attention to not only what is there but also "what has been taken out."

Such concerns gave rise to the project's formal conceit. Modelled after the popular game Mad Libs, *[SPACE]* extracts words, leaving the poems riddled with gaps, blanks, and breakages.

The words that I chose to take out were (a) the PERSON(s) and PLACE(s); then (b) the SPACE(s); then (c) the WIND(s) and BREATH(s) or BREATH(ING) [...] then (d) linguistic subjectivities such as LANGUAGE; and finally abstractions like LOVE and NATION and IMAGINATION. [...] I often found it most difficult to remove the EXCLAMATIONS in the works, such as Please!, Stop!, No!.

As in Mad Libs, the reader is given a word list before each poem, asking them to fill in grammatical elements such as "PLACE," "NOUN," or "PERSON." Early on, *[SPACE]* lists the actual words removed, such as:

gaza
gaza
heart
people
breathe
existence

The reader is thus implicitly presented with a choice: return what was taken, or transfigure the text into something new.

I ask Perry Cox about this textual structure. With subject matter so far from levity, why adopt the form of a game, literally inviting the reader to "play"? "If we don't know how risky it is to play games, then we don't understand how we're treating each other's lives," she replies. "Everybody's already playing it, whether they read this book or not."

We have taken out **children**. We have taken out **Palestinian men**. We have taken out **Navajo**. We have taken out their **words** and **language(s)**. We have taken out **body**. We have taken out **Trail of Tears**. We have taken out **Gaza**. We have taken out love. We have taken out **nation** and **imagination**.
What can we put back in?

[SPACE] is keenly aware of the violence of its interventions, stripping landscapes of "life," "language," "aliveness," removing bodies, body parts, breath. A project of this nature, if not carefully handled, also risks the symbolic violence of homogenizing the communities it depicts, collapsing disparate cultures' cosmologies and concerns. Similarly, addressing a "we" might risk assuming the reader's subject position, or even inadvertently implying that this book – and, by extension, its ethical project – is intended for only one audience.

When I ask about these dangers, it is clear Perry Cox has considered them deeply. Her interests lay in our (inter)communal obligations, the "threshold spaces" of imperfect empathy. The book is "not saying 'here are the answers,'" she says. "It's more, 'here are the problems [and] questions.'" While we may not always share the same responsibilities, or even know what those responsibilities are, *[SPACE]* invites us "to pay attention and dedicate commitment." We must, she says, "allow ourselves the error and the nuance and the play, that



[SPACE]

Lessons in Taking and Making

Alexei Perry Cox

Coach House Books

\$24.95, paper, 140pp

9781770569027


bravery or foolhardiness. We have to trust each other enough to at least try."

She adds, "As confounding as it is to try to write about, I think it's more dangerous not to."

[SPACE] rejects any easy epiphany, stating: "This is not meant to be a transcendence for you." Perry Cox says the book is "not going to be a balm. I want the communal obligation to be more important than the personal transcendence. I want us to dream our relationships with ourselves and our communities." "Born Palestinian, Born Black," composed from Suheir Hammad's collection of the same name, reads as a prayer to honour this dreaming:

[...] every plane of my life i
offered poetry to make sense of things. none of them
are pieces I could
write now, cause i'm no longer living in those
_____. But they're still real and _____,
cause those _____ are within me.

What is within us? What will we put back in? *[SPACE]* calls us to consider the realms of possibilities and risks inside and between us, to recognize the games we are all already playing and ask how we might reimagine their rules. If *[SPACE]* does not embody an authoritative position of political purity, that is its strength – it calls not for infallibility but commitment, our flawed and whole selves, in all their mess and capaciousness, in potential solidarity.

"There is less to be afraid of if we share more," says Perry Cox. "Being [a] composite of disconnection as well as points of entry – that's not a bad place to be." 

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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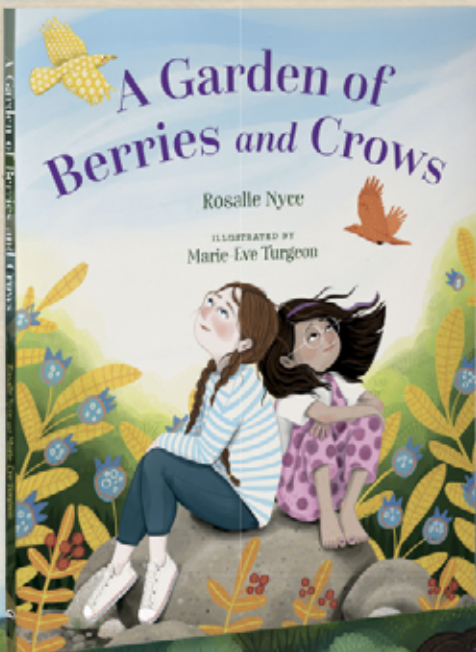
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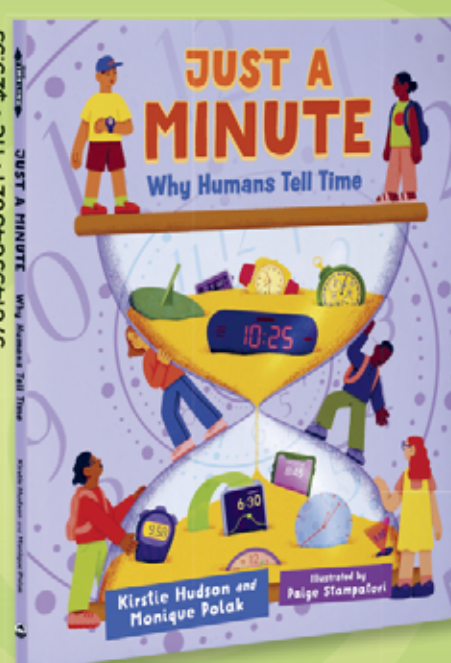
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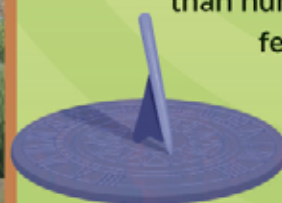
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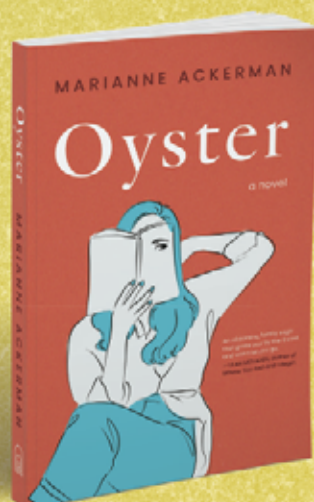
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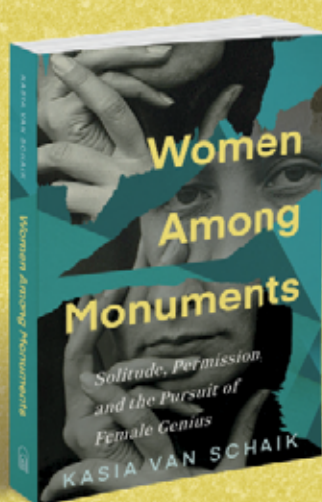
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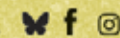


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By Taylor C. Noakes

Francine Pelletier

Soul Search

Timing is everything, in politics as much as talking about politics. As it happens, I had scheduled an interview with Francine Pelletier to discuss her new book, *Dream Interrupted: The Rise and Fall of Quebec Nationalism*, on the same day Quebec premier François Legault resigned from office.

It was an apt coincidence, given the central thesis of the book is that there is essentially a direct line from Jacques Parizeau's "money and the ethnic vote" comment on the night of the second Quebec sovereignty referendum to the rise of Legault and his Coalition Avenir Québec.

Pelletier makes an effective argument that the phenomenon of Legault, the CAQ, and their particular brand of ethnonationalism, though rooted in deeper cultural traditions of survival, exploited feelings of shame, guilt, and frustration experienced by the Quiet Revolution generation in the wake of the second referendum loss.

Pelletier notes the sharp distinction between René Lévesque's inclusive and progressive aspirations for a new Quebec, and the retrograde conservative nationalism of Legault. Though she's not convinced another referendum is on the horizon, the impish and impudent Parti Québécois leader Paul St-Pierre Plamondon has so far demonstrated himself to be cut more from Legault's cloth than from Lévesque's. While Pelletier concedes the conservative nationalism that brought Legault to power will likely never go away, it is unclear whether Legault's abrupt resignation signals the possibility of Quebec turning a page.

Dream Interrupted is an excellent summary of recent Quebec history as viewed through the lens of the question of Quebec nationalism. Pelletier's personal touches – there's a considerable amount of personal reflection and elements of memoir woven throughout – make the book more engaging than a typical academic history. Pelletier addresses the undeniable fact that the question of sovereignty and nationalism in Quebec is intimately connected to a specific generation that came of age in the era of post-war prosperity, space

exploration, civil rights, and decolonization. There are also the greater philosophical issues: what are Quebec's values, what is Quebec's soul, and is there a future for inclusive civic nationalism in Quebec?

Though these questions merit an objective and academic assessment, it's hard to imagine how such a discussion could even begin without first grounding them in personal experience. *Dream Interrupted* starts that conversation.

mRb: What inspired you to write this book?

Francine Pelletier: I actually had done a documentary on the subject of Quebec nationalism. It wasn't about my story at all, but about how – slowly but surely, since the first referendum – Quebec nationalism and politics changed. Essentially it has gone from progressive to conservative, even though few people like to admit it. So I felt the need to say, "this has been happening, and let me show you how."

That was the reason behind the documentary. And then I was approached by an editor to do a book on it and he suggested that I personalize it with my own story. So, I did.

mRb: Do you think Quebecers got tired of François Legault and the CAQ's brand of conservative ethnonationalism?

FP: The real genius of François Legault was to have seen, and acted upon, the fact that Quebecers were very much tired of the sovereignty debate. As I've said endlessly in my past political life, Quebecers, French Quebecers, are profoundly nationalist, but that doesn't mean they're profoundly separatist, and the two failed referendums are proof of that.

When he founded the Coalition Avenir Québec, that's what was attractive about him. He said "OK, we've had enough of this debate, it's not going anywhere, we're

moving on to the real stuff, practical stuff." He was the businessman, he was going to get the economy going again, but he wound up being discounted completely because that was the only goal the CAQ ever had. The rest of their ideas were either borrowed from the Quebec Liberals – particularly on economic matters – or from the Parti Québécois, especially language, immigration, and identity politics.

That said, I don't think Quebecers grew tired of his nationalist policies. In fact, that's why the Parti Québécois is well-positioned to win the next election. What's really striking about Legault is the spectacular fall from grace he

...what are Quebec's values, what is Quebec's soul, and is there a future for inclusive civic nationalism in Quebec?

experienced. He went from being exceptionally popular – arguably more popular than even Justin Trudeau was at the height of his popularity – to being the least popular.

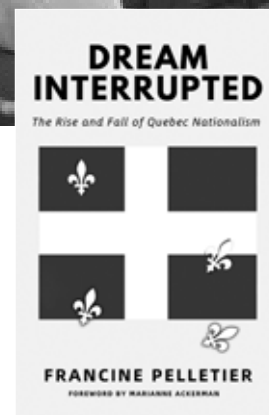
He ended up being a totally incompetent leader. He wasn't a visionary, he wasn't even much of a nationalist. He was brought into politics by Lucien Bouchard, who named him to cabinet even before he was elected, and named him education minister. And he didn't do much as an education minister, then he creates his own party and wins the election and says that he'd do something about education and healthcare – which is what practically every politician in Canada says – and he was terrible at it.

mRb: In referencing your arrival in Montreal in the 1970s, you speak of the

warmth of interactions with others – like you were returning to something familiar and familial, but also that you were being welcomed into something innately different from what you had experienced in the rest of Canada. Do you think this still exists? Would it exist for a Franco-Ontarian or Acadian today? Would it exist for a Vietnamese-Québécois? Can there be "hyphenated Quebecers" today, outside of the linguistic divide?

FP: This is the big thing that changed in Quebec, in recent decades. It was an important change that was part of the Quiet Revolution, particularly under the Parti Québécois in the 1970s, that recognized the importance of integrating immigrants into Quebec society. I mention Gérald Godin who spoke of immigrants as "precious stones" building up the walls of our country.

It's funny you mention Vietnamese-Quebecers because of the recent controversy over Kim Thúy. She wrote a book which was recently turned into a film [*Ru*], which speaks about her family's arrival as refugees in Quebec in the late 1970s, and how they were welcomed with open arms in Granby. She's one of our symbols of integration, and she's recently said she wanted to leave. Perhaps Quebecers don't want to admit that they're not as welcoming as they'd like to believe, or maybe they don't want to admit things have really changed here, but if Kim Thúy is saying it, well, I rest my case. [Thúy's comments, made during a September 2025 interview on Radio-Canada about her new play, received an exceptional backlash on social media and from populist right-wing pundits.]



Dream Interrupted
The Rise and Fall of
Quebec Nationalism
Francine Pelletier
Sutherland House
\$23.95, paperback, 100pp
9781998365555

mRb: Why are referendums viewed as a setback or defeat for all Quebecers, not just those who voted in favour of sovereignty or independence?
FP: I think the close result of the second referendum left a profound psychological scar on the province. It wasn't obvious at the time and many people didn't see what had happened, but it cut deep. The most important thing there is to know about Quebec is that the province turned itself around in the space of about a decade. The transformation that occurred here between 1960, beginning with the election of Jean Lesage and the Quebec Liberals under the "Maîtres chez nous" slogan, to the creation of the Parti Québécois under René Lévesque in 1968, and then a PQ government eight years later... This was the culmination of a miracle that happened during the Quiet Revolution.

An indication of this transformation is the drop in women's fertility rates: it went from one of the world's highest to one of the world's lowest in twelve or fifteen years. The domination of the Catholic Church was cast aside, and a business community and a cultural community was developed within a span of twenty years. We went from being poor and not very well-educated to being modern, middle-class, progressive, and very well-educated, all within a generation. This was a considerable change. The referendums were applauding this transformation.

René Lévesque himself wasn't much of a separatist. He didn't have much choice but to play strong arm with the federal government, but there's a reason why his referendum was about sovereignty-association. Even with Parizeau's referendum, it was understood that there would be negotiation with Ottawa, and that we'd never be completely separate. It was the culmination of trying to become masters in our own house, and so when the second referendum failed, I think a lot of people interpreted that as though we were going back to who we were before the Quiet Revolution.

mRb: Do you think there will be another referendum?

FP: It's difficult for people outside of Quebec to understand, but having a third referendum without a degree of certainty it could be won would be psychological suicide. I suspect [Paul St-Pierre Plamondon] will renege on the promise of holding another referendum. The polls are clear that he can't win, and with Trump's threats against Canada, Quebecers are *solidaire* with Canada. Unless there's a major political attack against Quebec, the winning conditions aren't there, and Paul St-Pierre Plamondon would be tarred and feathered if he loses. mrb

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

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POFF

Sweet fresh air!

By CATHON

PASTIMES

You're growing up too fast!

No I'm not. I'm only 5!

Already 5! Plus 5 and you'll be 10!

Then 15... 20...

I don't wanna get big, because I don't wanna die.

Maybe you'll be the very first person to live forever, though.

And one day you'll realize, it's not your own death that's scary. It's the thought of other people dying...

Huh?

By PASCAL GIRARD

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young readers

A Garden of Berries and Crows

Rosalie Nyce
Illustrated by Marie-Ève Turgeon
Orca Book Publishers
\$21.95, hardcover, 32pp
9781459840072
Ages 6-8



word we use every day when planning activities, waking up and going to bed, or just checking our clocks and phones. But what does time really mean – and where does the idea of time come from?

Filled with vivid illustrations, fun facts, and fascinating information, *Just a Minute* provides kids with a go-to reference for how humans track, understand, and control time.

Each chapter looks at a different aspect of time in colourful detail, including a history of time, internal versus external clocks, how to live in the moment, and even how pets and plants can tell time, too!

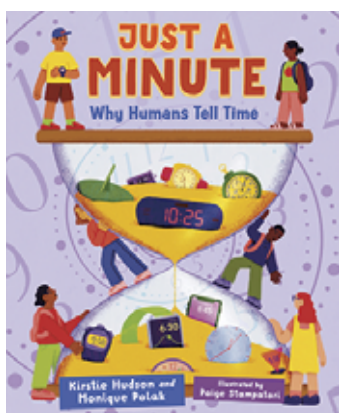
Scattered throughout the book are references to books and movies about time, as well as quotes from scientists, authors, illustrators, and even a Formula One racecar driver. The information is organized in a highly accessible and engaging way, with a handy glossary and index that make it easy for kids to learn and apply their newfound knowledge about time.



◆ ◆ ◆
Philomena and the Big Bad Mimi
Geneviève Jannelle
Illustrated by Jasmine Mirra Turcotte
Kids Can Press
\$23.99, hardcover, 24pp
9781525315183
Ages 3-7

Philomena loves to talk about herself. In fact, she talks so much about herself that she ends up playing alone at recess and making her little brother cry.

But it's not Philomena's fault. Whenever a friend or classmate is talking, the big, bad Mimi takes over – latching on to Philomena's



Maeve has no friends, except for her crows – the real ones, as well as the origami ones she folds to keep her company and sometimes lets fly away. Grieving the recent loss of her aunt and teased at school for being different, Maeve struggles with her feelings and with fitting in.

When she meets new girl Fern on the way home from school, they strike up a friendship. Fern, who has just lost her father, is drawing flowers in a sketchbook, and soon both girls learn to navigate their grief through creativity and resilience – and Maeve's unique lens of neurodivergence. Suddenly the path forward isn't quite so lonely anymore.

A Garden of Berries and Crows takes a compassionate look at how being different doesn't mean being wrong, and grief is a process that children go through in their own, unique ways. Author Rosalie Nyce calls this her "love letter to kids with brains like mine," and Marie-Ève Turgeon's rich and colourful illustrations remind young readers that we can still see the loved ones we've lost in the beauty of the world around us.

◆ ◆ ◆

Just a Minute Why Humans Tell Time

Kirstie Hudson and Monique Polak
Illustrated by Paige Stampatori
Orca Book Publishers
\$29.95, hardcover, 96pp
9781459840621
Ages 9-12

Ever wondered why the hands on a clock move clockwise? Or why you feel sleepy at night? Did you know trees have a ring for every year they grow, and giant sequoias can have over 3,000?

Just a Minute: Why Humans Tell Time explores all the ways time plays an integral part in our lives, both as an external force and internal clock. Time is a

belly button to say something louder and better, making her feel like the most interesting person in the room.

Ostracized at school and alienating her soccer team with her Mimi antics, Philomena realizes that she needs to get rid of big, bad Mimi for good. With the help of one of her teachers and a few magic words, she learns there's a simple way to not only speak up, but to stop and listen, too.

Illustrated by Jasmine Mirra Turcotte, *Philomena and the Big Bad Mimi* tackles with care and kindness a common challenge that many kids face, depicting Mimi as a colourful butterfly figure and using compassion and self-awareness to give Philomena the tools she needs to fit in. It is a gentle lesson to help young children remember that listening is just as important as having your say.

◆ ◆ ◆

My Subway Runs

James Gladstone
Illustrated by Pierre Pratt
Groundwood Books
\$21.99, hardcover, 32pp
9781773067544
Ages 3-7

With a child's sense of excitement, a young boy accompanies his mother on a subway ride downtown. Curious, enchanted, and sometimes a little overwhelmed, he descends further and further

underground to discover a bustling world filled with whole new sights and sounds.

From grey puddles and screeching wheels to packed subway cars and a man he calls the "sleeper in the corner," the boy takes in every detail – eventually descending at Union Station, where even more excitement awaits. By the time the pair head home again, the boy has gained a new perspective on the city and the people who live there.

Written in a wonderfully poetic style that mimics the movement of the subway, *My Subway Runs* offers a positive message that helps to demystify public transit. By presenting the journey from the boy's point of view, the story brings us into a space where the mundane is suddenly exhilarating and people normally overlooked are now able to be seen.

Award-winning illustrator Pierre Pratt fills each page with his unmistakable style,



providing young readers with a rich and vivid tapestry of detail that invites them to lean in and take a closer look.

◆ ◆ ◆

My Mom Is Like a Kite

Lisl H. Detlefsen
Illustrated by
Nathalie Dion

Groundwood Books
\$21.99, hardcover, 32pp
9781773068534
Ages 3-7

When a parent experiences mental illness, it can leave a child feeling stranded and struggling to fix what's wrong. Using the metaphor of a kite that soars out of reach, as well as a boat that bobs and sinks, *My Mom Is Like a Kite* looks at mental illness from a child's point of view, offering understanding, comfort, and tools to help weather the storm.

In this compassionately told story, a child tries to pull their mother down out of the sky like a kite, only to find themselves bailing water from a sinking boat – all to no avail. Feeling helpless and often alone, with only

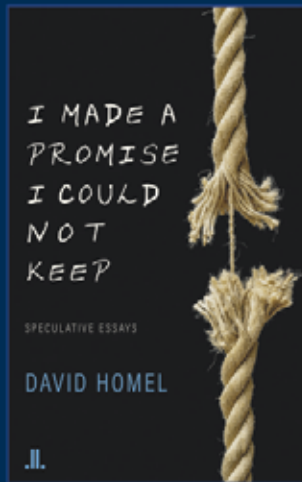
their cat for company, they ask Mom if she will be OK, but Mom is unable to answer.

It is only when they visit Grace the therapist, on one of Mom's good days, that things start to fall into place. The child's job isn't to bail out the boat to help Mom. Instead, they talk about their feelings, draw, and even play games. And

sometimes they don't have to say anything at all.

With delicate, whimsical illustrations by Nathalie Dion, *My Mom Is Like a Kite* provides parents and children alike with a simple roadmap for approaching mental illness within a family. It offers a positive message about normalizing the need to reach out for help, all while giving children a tool to help manage their own feelings and fears – now and for the rest of their lives. **msc**

Tina Wayland holds an MA in Creative Writing from Concordia, winning the department's McKeen Award in 2021 and 2023. She's published in such places as *carte blanche*, *Headlight*, *yolk*, *LBRNTH*, and forthcoming in *Scrivener*, as well as longlisted for the CBC Nonfiction Prize and shortlisted for *Room's* Short Forms Contest. Tina is currently writing a book about her Lithuanian grandmother, funded by the Canada Council for the Arts.



I Made a Promise I Could Not Keep

Speculative Essays by **David Homel**

March 14 • ISBN 9781773901893 • \$19.95

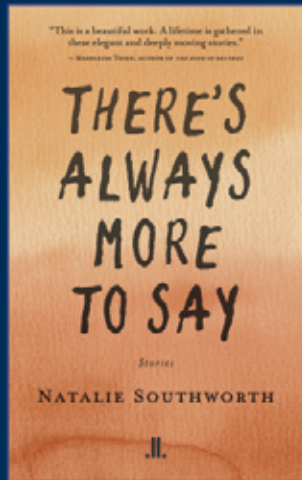


Books and their writers can get into some pretty murky territory when they set out into the world. Something seems like a good idea, and they go for it; another word for that is "inspiration." Each of the essays in this engagingly provocative collection about the morals of writing explores an aspect of what writers do, but you don't have to be a writer to consider the same issues. You just have to be human.

Praise for *Lunging into the Underbrush*:

"If I have to age, I hope I do it the way David Homel has: kicking and screaming and laughing at the demons. In *Lunging*, he reminds us that aging is just another word for growing, and that to grow is to remain vitally alive."

—Wayne Grady, author of *Up From Freedom*



There's Always More to Say

by **Natalie Southworth**

March 14 • ISBN: 9781773901862 • \$26.95



Infused with humour and verve, yet full of warmth, Natalie Southworth's debut collection is a disquieting, soul-stirring portrait of female ambition, family fragility and dislocation.

In *There's Always More to Say*, girls and young women, on the road to middle age, contend with internal struggles—a daughter's disconnection from her spirituality-obsessed father, the pressure to succeed, the fear of coming undone, the loss of art—as they try to hold it together despite the demands and loneliness of modern life.

"This is a beautiful work. A lifetime is gathered in these elegant and deeply moving stories."

—Madeleine Thien, *The Book of Records*



Beyond Ken Dryden

by **Oren Safdie**

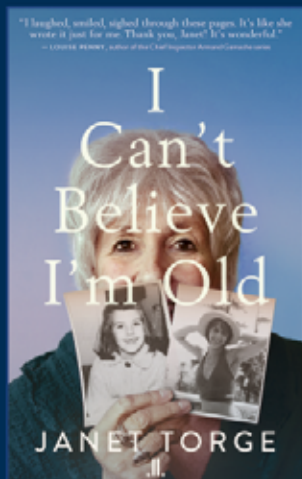
May 1 • ISBN: 9781773901923 • \$21.95



A family falling apart. A team holding the city together. *Beyond Ken Dryden* reflects Safdie's childhood admiration for Hall of Fame goalie Ken Dryden and the Montreal Canadiens, set against a backdrop of personal upheaval, including a devastating house fire in Westmount and his parents' eventual divorce. For Safdie, the Canadiens were not just athletes but symbols of stability and comfort during turbulent times—a surrogate family of sorts.

"It feels very good." That's what Ken Dryden said when he heard Oren Safdie had written *Beyond Ken Dryden*: "Childhood experiences that relate to friends, to family members—to a brother, to a father, to a mother—stay with you. And oftentimes, those have to do with sports: you loved the same team together, or you had a favourite and your brother had a different favorite team, so when someone does something like this, it feels very good."

—Ken Dryden, radio interview with sports journalist Mike Cohen



I Can't Believe I'm Old

Essays on Aging by **Janet Torge**

May 1 • ISBN: 9781773901954 • \$26.95



I Can't Believe I'm Old is a collection of essays by Janet Torge as she stumbles and is dragged into old age. She examines aging closely, hoping to find little pots of golden insights but actually just ends up having a good laugh or two along the way.

"I laughed, smiled, sighed through these pages. It's like she wrote it just for me. Thank you, Janet! It's wonderful."

—Louise Penny

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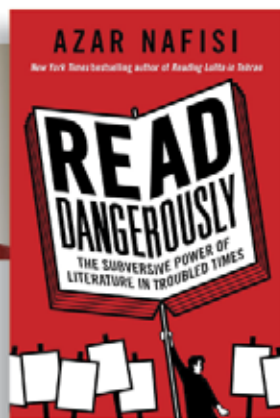
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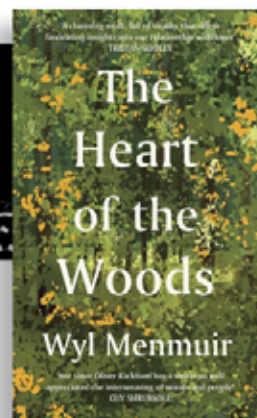
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