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Montreal Review of Books

SUMMER 2026



CHANEL SUTHERLAND • GUY REX RODGERS • NATALIE DOONAN • SINA QUEYRAS

Say hello to the new QWF team.

Since 1993, the Quebec Writers' Federation has been at the heart of English-language literary culture in Quebec, championing writers at every stage of their journey. Now in its 28th year, QWF welcomes two new staff members to help shape the future of Quebec's literary scene.

TWO NEW FACES, SAME SPIRIT OF EXCELLENCE



Rémy Attig THEY/THEM

Executive Director STARTING AUG 1

Rémy Attig, PhD, is the incoming executive director of the Quebec Writers' Federation. Prior to joining QWF, Rémy worked as an associate professor of sociolinguistics and translation where their research focused on minority/minoritized language communities. In a pre-academic life, they worked as the senior director of operations at the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE), the operations manager of the David Suzuki Foundation, and the executive director of Projet 10 / Project 10, Montreal's longest-running organization supporting 2SLGBTQIA+ youth. Through their research, teaching, writing, and activism, Rémy demonstrates that the way people tell their stories, and the language(s) they choose to use, are often as important as the message they share with the world.



Zac Remple HE/HIM

Operations Manager

Zac Remple is a writer, theatre artist, and cultural producer whose work explores storytelling, performance, community, and the relationship between art and public life. His career has taken him through arts organizations, pride organizations, cultural institutions, and corporate environments, where he has worked in programming, events, communications, and organizational operations. Originally from Winnipeg, Zac holds a bachelor's in Communications and Culture from the University of Calgary. He maintains an active artistic practice in theatre, performance, poetry, and interdisciplinary arts and is passionate about supporting artists, strengthening creative communities, and creating opportunities for people to connect through stories.



John Wickham HE/HIM

Communications Manager

John Wickham is a writer and has been the communications officer of QWF since 2022. He is also the web designer for Quist, QWF's online literary journal publishing poetry, prose, and art by Quebec youth. His writing has appeared in *The Montreal Review of Books* and *Ahoy*, among others, and he was longlisted for the 2026 CBC Short Story Prize. He looks forward to serving the organization in an expanded role as Communications Manager.



Supporting, connecting, and inspiring Quebec writers

QWF.ORG



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For editorial inquiries contact:

AELAQ 1200 Atwater Avenue, Suite #3

Westmount, QC H3Z 1X4

Telephone: 514-932-5633

Email: editor@mtlreviewofbooks.ca

For advertising inquiries contact:

ads@mtlreviewofbooks.ca

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Kaori Izumiya is a Japanese visual artist based in
Montreal whose practice spans painting, murals, illus-
tration, and animation backgrounds. She studied oil
painting at Tokyo University of the Arts and has since
built an international practice across Tokyo, New
Zealand, Morocco, and New York.

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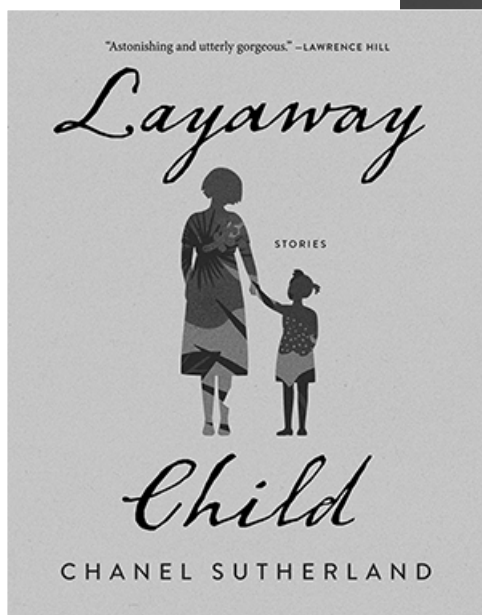
Reviewed by Meaghan Thurston



Sara Prune is a
full-time illustrator
and cartoonist
since 2022. Her
world is rich and
colourful, and her
characters are
sensitive and a
little quirky. She
loves themes
related to nature,
animals, courage
and self-discovery.

BY LÉA MURAT-INGLES

Honouring Lost Dreams



Layaway Child
Chanel Sutherland
House of Anansi
\$24.99, paperback, 296pp
9781487013639

Chanel Sutherland's debut book of short stories, *Layaway Child*, gets its name from a term she learned when she first arrived in Montreal as a child with her sister to reunite with her mother, who had, like many, decided to seek new horizons in North America. The inspiration came from when she and her mom would go to Zellers. "I was maybe twelve-thirteen and she was putting [clothes] on layaway, where you pay a little bit [at a time], and then eventually when you pay it up, you get it," she recalls. "I was standing at cash with her and I was thinking, 'Oh my god, that's what happened to me.' ... She put me aside with my grandparents and she paid and paid and paid until she was able to finally afford to [get me] over."

And it was when she was a layaway child herself, at seven years old, that Sutherland first knew she wanted to be a storyteller. Not yet a writer, she already understood the value of her mother's legacy and what she sacrificed by leaving everything behind in the beautiful Caribbean sun of Saint Vincent to follow dreams of a better life in America – dreams that were met with the cold and unforgiving winter air of Montreal. She has now been writing stories “for the better part of my life” and describes her journey as a writer as ideal: “Quebec has really been so supportive... I've been embraced by this community so much.”

The stories of *Layaway Child* came to Sutherland gradually amid her adulthood, when her relationship with her mother blossomed anew: “I'm in my forties now, so my mom has kind of transitioned from just being my mom to now being my friend... [She] is a big part of my writing process because there are so many things I didn't know about. I was ten when I came here, so there's a lot of stuff that adults in the Caribbean tend to keep away from children. So finally, I'm learning about those and seeing them with a new eye, with the adult's eye instead of the child's eye.”

Some of these stories, before even making the collection, had already gained recognition by winning the CBC Short Story Prize in 2021 and 2022, as well as the Commonwealth Short Story Prize in 2025. Editing all the stories together was an entirely different process for Sutherland once they were acquired by Anansi: “We needed to figure out how to make them more connected, and that's when a really cool part of the process started for me, to create and find ways to edit the characters. [There are] three different arcs within the book itself. I really enjoyed doing it.”

Each of these arcs is dedicated to female characters who intertwine throughout the stories, especially young Black girls growing up in a process of migration. For Sutherland, it was important to put these girls, who are too often overlooked, at the forefront of her book. Her spark of inspiration came from reading Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in her childhood. One character in *Layaway Child* discovers the poetry collection in the library. Seeing herself represented in Angelou's book opened Sutherland's eyes to

the importance of naming these experiences and the difficulties that come with them: “Being a Black dark-skinned girl, I was expected to grow up way sooner than I should have been asked to. I think there's this expectation [in the Caribbean] that's put on Black girls to grow up and take care of their younger siblings... I wanted to put visibility on that and to show the emotional damage it can do to their childhoods that are being erased in real time – their girlhoods.”

Layaway Child thus could be qualified as a collection of coming-of-age stories, but far from the traditional sense. Girls and women of all ages experience deep personal shifts in response to living in a foreign land that refuses to recognize them despite the labour they provide as maids, nannies, students, or teachers: “[It's] a book about becoming, because the characters in it, they're constantly becoming

something.” Sutherland also speaks about the importance of “folks having dreams and having to defer those dreams, having to transition and become something else in order to survive... It's a reality for many Caribbean folks who don't get to live their dreams, because they have to put them aside in order to find a way to make a living for themselves and their children.”

And by writing these castaway dreams into the stories of her collection, Sutherland effectively challenges this cycle of mere survival and manages to make a lifelong dream come true for herself and her mother: “My mom's dream is what I'm doing now. If you were to see my mom, the way she is reacting to all of this, you would think she wrote the damn book. This is the dream coming true for her... She gets to see that her sacrifices – and she would never call them sacrifices – but her sacrifices were not taken for granted and amounted to something important.”

Above all, Sutherland's stories are an offering to the members of her community

who supported her throughout her life and are represented in the book: “As an immigrant, the world is so small, especially as a child. I think my mom made it even smaller for us by ensuring that we had community, that we understood and recognized it.” And for the author, this recognition would be useless without including the elders who share their knowledge via oral tradition – deeply rooted in the Caribbean – to keep the collective culture afloat despite the distance of their homelands. “I have this fondness of speaking to older people because they have so much

knowledge to pass on,” she says, adding that she wants to pay homage to those women who came before: “It's a way of saying, ‘I do see you.’ I appreciate all that came before and that allowed me to be where I am.”

It is in this spirit of remembering that Sutherland chooses to close out her collection with the award-winning short story “Descend,”

which takes place in the entirely different era of chattel slavery, and creates a profound and meticulous rupture for the reader: “When I write, I try to remember how we got here, from enslaved Africans who were ripped from their homes. And I try to make sure that some spirit of that experience exists in any of my writing... especially at a time when some folks in power are trying to erase our history, and it's so important that we don't allow it.” To write this story, she explains, “I decided I was going to channel the ancestors. I sat there and it was so immediate. I felt like they were there with me.” By tying the destiny of the characters to a larger trajectory rich in history and possibilities not yet known, this short story makes the collection truly triumphant. 

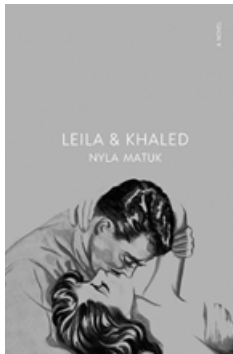
Léa Murat-Ingles is a doctoral student in French literature at the University of Sherbrooke, a research assistant, a college literature professor, and an author. Her research focuses on Haitian literature in Quebec, Afrofuturism, AI, and archives in creative research. Her first novel, *Les rythmes de la poussière*, was published in spring 2024 in the Les Martiales collection by Éditions du remue-ménage. It was shortlisted for the inaugural Radio-Canada Caroline Dawson Prize.

fiction

The Ethics of Witnessing

Leila & Khaled
Nyla Matuk
House of Anansi
\$26.99, paperback, 224pp
9781487013974

Nyla Matuk's *Leila & Khaled* is at once a romance novel, a travel narrative, and an intimate portrayal of a diasporic woman who wants to better understand her family's history and, by extension, a nation's. The novel's protagonist and narrator, Leila, is a middle-aged Palestinian-Canadian film scholar who travels to her ancestral homeland under the pretence of an academic delegation trip. Leila explains that she "had come here to see," but omits the verb's direct object, prompting readers to fill in the gap with implied objects. Nevertheless, she repeatedly questions the ethics of merely witnessing the ongoing violence, disillusionment, resistance, and rage that surrounds her. Navigating waves of grief, anger, and guilt, Leila is caught off guard by an unexpected emotion: desire. Instantly smitten with Khaled, one of the



delegation's tour guides, Leila finds her trip transformed by an enthralling romance.

When I first came across Matuk's novel, I expected to find a love story amid the violence of life in Palestine, but was surprised to find how much the novel is dedicated to unpacking the politics of dark tourism. Broadly defined as a form of tourism that involves

travelling to sites associated with death and war, dark tourism is a contentious practice that risks making a spectacle of trauma, particularly when it involves tourists from the Global North travelling to the Global South. However, some make the case for dark tourism's potential to educate tourists, commemorate injustice, and encourage social justice. The characters in *Leila & Khaled* attempt to confront dark tourism's ethical quandaries, yet, with an equal dose of pragmatism and nuance, Matuk exposes how messy and often ineffectual this undertaking can be.

The novel also asks what role art might play in the dark tourism industry. A scene set in the Banksy-designed Walled Off Hotel in Bethlehem



highlights the quiet intensity of Matuk's writing and her skill at grappling with this complexity. Built in 2017, the controversial boutique hotel, which faces the West Bank barrier erected by the Israeli government to enforce its apartheid system, is a popular tourist destination. Here, the novel's characters debate whether being customers of the hotel makes them complicit in Palestinian oppression. Ultimately, the delegation can't come to a consensus on whether the hotel is a shameless commodification of violence, "a fetish shrine," or a symbol of resistance. Counteracting the group's instinct to overintellectualize, Khaled explains that "it helps the cause of liberation to witness art close to state projects – jails, walls, concrete barriers" because it invites people to consider "what could be there instead." In many ways, the novel itself serves a similar purpose: to highlight how the act of witnessing can be a powerful form of confrontation.

Set at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Matuk's depiction of Palestine

is unlike the one we have come to picture in the wake of the war in Gaza. In the novel's present, the country is filled with tourists, from "American Evangelicals" to "Malaysian Muslims" visiting the sacred sites depicted in their holy books. Through this setting, Matuk depicts quotidian life in Palestine shaped by an apartheid system, while also offering readers an unflinching portrayal of the violence, both subtle and overt, perpetrated by the Israeli military tasked with enforcing it. The delegation's tour is mired by checkpoints, suspicion, and persecution, yet Leila is painfully aware of how her status as a Canadian tourist affords her relative immunity from the brunt of the discrimination faced by the Palestinian locals around her. All the while, her romantic and intellectual connection to Khaled serves as a respite from it all.

The novel is primarily dialogue-driven, as Matuk boldly takes on the task of informing the reader about the prolonged conflicts that have shaped the region. However, the author's understated prose shines most when it depicts Leila reflecting on diasporic identity, exile, dispossession, and how love can be a powerful form of resistance. Few novels succeed, as *Leila & Khaled* does, in pivoting between meditative scenes and nail-biting ones with such swift precision. **mb**

Krystale Tremblay-Moll is a Dominican-Canadian writer and literary scholar based in Montreal. She holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Toronto and an MA in English from Concordia University.

Microcosms of Pleasure

Wavering Futures
Kawai Shen
Metatron Press
\$20, paperback, 120pp
9781988355740

In her debut collection *Wavering Futures*, Toronto author Kawai Shen summons big doom energy. At every turn, Shen declines the siren calls of hand-wringing and hopeful sermonizing about the end of this world. Somewhere in between, she slips us a note on just how slim the chances are of survival, and the possibility of finding pleasure in that solemn fact.

A mix of fiction and personal essays, the twelve pieces in this collection are equally divided into three parts. The first, "Imaginary Utopias," is saddled with nostalgia. One narrator reminisces about the good ol' days of childhood escapism. Another laments the loss of the internet before its commercialization: "there was a radical safety in the screen of pseudo-anonymity that cyberspace offered." Together, they could be an elegy for a dangerously naive progressivism. But such ideology isn't quite dead. In



"Safe Spaces for Modern Citizens," Shen satirizes the popular leftist concept of "safe spaces." She points to how the language of "safety" can be co-opted to reanimate ascetic visions of purity that go hand in hand with fascism.

The book's middle section, "Imminent Collapse," promises thematic weightiness, but skims on emotional force. Shen weaves grotesque details of climate catastrophe and far-right authoritaria-

nism into an understated background. An expansive state euthanasia program, the failure of weather forecasting, and a scarcity of potable water are mentioned in passing.

In "Bottomless," Gertrude, a night cleaner at a gay history archive, befriends the Head Archivist. She recalls a conversation with him before he was disappeared by the state. She'd asked him about predicting the future: "So then how do you know if you're going to walk off a cliff?" His response: "Ah, that is a very good question... Because most people do not ask this until they are falling." It's not until each story is at its end that the irredeemable nature of the worlds Shen depicts sinks in.

While Shen's worlds are effectively haunted, the dangers feel too familiar to spook. This is less a reflection on her craft than on the challenge of rendering present horrors on the page when fascists are making headlines every day. As with other experimental apocalyptic literature, Shen prioritizes fragmented, atmospheric conjuring over dramatic linear plots. The atmosphere? A sense of overwhelming impotence.

That's not to say it's sexless, though. In fact, I found Shen's work most alluring in the erotica included in several stories. These climactic interventions ferry queer desire into the collective imagination. They proffer a strange satisfaction in denied gratification, in being overpowered. The third and final part of the book, "Survival Tactics," gestures toward

such microcosms of pleasure, albeit without much conviction.

In a second part of the story "Bottomless," we learn that Gertrude becomes a dominatrix. Shen's sharp lines bring her wicked characters into relief. After a scene of rough kink play, Gertrude sits by her slumbering sub: "You are enough," she murmured, lying to no one in particular. I could fucking crucify the kid, she thought, and nothing in this world would be redeemed." At the end of this world, carnal delight may be the sole pursuit over which anyone has agency, Shen seems to suggest. Her characters revel in how inconsequential they are, modelling how one might find joy in being put (or trapped) in one's place.

Story after story, the reader is given a bitter pill to swallow – one that doesn't appear to contain healing properties. The book ends on a strange note with "19 Covid-Safe Scenes," a series of erotic vignettes of intimacy under pandemic restrictions. The story recalls the improvisational approaches to pleasure that queer communities cultivated during the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis. Yet, the narrative almost insists on pushing away sentimentality about human connection. Settling on neither hope nor resignation, the collection feels suspended in a precarious nihilism that itself wavers on the edge of collapse. **mb**

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

Wandering Roots

Asha in Her Garden
Anita Rau Badami
Penguin Random House
\$36, hardcover, 304pp
9780735274341

Botanical images and metaphors are central to Anita Rau Badami's novel, *Asha in Her Garden*. Through the vital garden, trees, and flowers, Badami lays out the life of her protagonist, Asha Mohan, whom the readers meet on the occasion of her seventieth birthday, when a maple tree in her Montreal garden must be cut down. Using the felling of the tree as a device to launch into the protagonist's reflections, the novel unspools into an intergenerational family tale that moves between India and Montreal. The novel is divided into four sections; the first opens in 2003, in Montreal, with the felling of Asha's tree. The second part moves between Montreal and Bangalore, stretching from 1960 to 1996. Then, in the third section, the readers return to 2003 Montreal. The final section details Asha's party in her garden, following the felling of the maple tree in 2023.

Asha's Montreal garden, and the tree-lined house ringed by cascading roses in Bangalore, work well as a botanical theme that brings together Asha's different lives. Badami's writing shines when she describes the

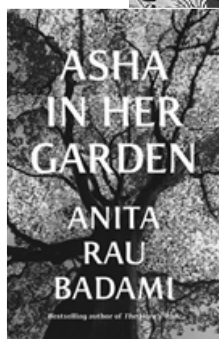
Botanical metaphors in the novel also play into the central tension that animates its protagonist, the contradictory desire to be rooted while being curious to leave one's "roots" behind, as Asha does when she makes the decision to move to Montreal.

Bangalore house, specifically when she imbues the house with its own lore, describing how the rose bushes were infected by her great-grandmother's unhappiness, destroying their flowers. Through these touches, the novel builds a vivid and evocative picture of Asha's childhood in a house with green verandahs and mango trees.

Botanical metaphors in the novel also play into the central tension that animates its protagonist, the contradictory desire to be rooted while being curious to leave one's "roots" behind, as Asha does when she makes the decision to move to Montreal. In fact, when Asha purchases her house in Montreal, one of the first things she does is to envision the garden space with tropical flowers, a callback to



ANGELA LEWIS



what she had left behind. Badami excels at bringing Asha to life in the novel; one can clearly see Asha's flaws and how they affect

the various relationships in her life, including with her husband and children. While the writing in the novel conveys Asha's struggles perfectly well through dialogue and action, in some places Badami externalizes the same emotional struggles into a secondary character named "the hag." Explained as a childhood manifestation of anxiety, at times the hag takes away from the momentum of the narrative.

The different sections in the novel allow Badami to build her settings through imagery. Some of those images, specifically the ones about India, feel slightly stuck in the past, such as goddesses in bottles. Through Asha's husband Suresh, who works as a journalist, Badami balances the former representation of India with a more contemporary one in which critics of the government are being disappeared. Badami accurately captures the western side of representation through Asha's landlady, who assumes that Asha must have led a horrible life back home after having seen news about a flood in India.

Overall, *Asha in Her Garden* is an extremely readable novel, which ultimately speaks to the power of art and representation. As the novel draws to a close, Asha reflects on her life, looking at her daughter's paintings inspired by her family. Asha's closing thoughts are the kernel of the novel; art holds the potential to elevate even the simplest of family histories. **mb**

Priscilla Jolly is a writer living in Montreal.

Rock of Aging

The Guilt Trippers
Philippe Mineau
Baraka Books
\$24.95, paperback, 200pp
9781771864107

Do Canadians only smoke weed without tobacco? Does Stompin' Tom Connors still speak to local songwriters today? These and other questions are touched upon in Philippe Mineau's *The Guilt Trippers*, about a musician and stay-at-home dad chafing against the constraints of domestic life after moving to Montreal's Little Italy.

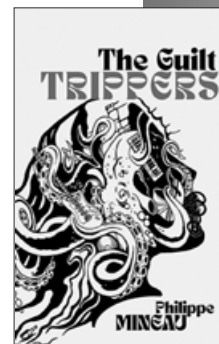
While his wife finds her footing in the corporate world, Moe Tremblay takes care of their two little boys and reconnects with charismatic loose cannon songwriter Dean to revive his dreams of musical glory – or, at least, the joys of spending time in malodorous jam spaces with grizzled musicians nursing low-grade substance abuse issues. Dean's band Guilt Trip has a big show at Barfly in a couple of months, and they've recruited Moe to beef up their sound with his keys.

The Guilt Trippers is at its best in its vivid descriptions of the city's neighbourhoods, as well as the anxieties and uncertainties of the Montreal musician lifestyle. The grit, camaraderie, and seedy lack of glamour all ring true, as does the frustrating nature of being in a band with self-centred trainwreck types. Drummer Wilburn's reasons for continuing to grind it out against all odds feel heartfelt: "It's an escape... A little recognition for all I am, for all I can do. Otherwise, I'm just some bum on the street."

Nonetheless, it's more of a slice-of-life-cum-domestic drama than an actual dive into Montreal's music scene. The references to Neil Young, Mick Jagger, and Canadiana tropes like canoes and wandering Newfies don't feel truly representative of the city's weirdo, avant-garde nature. Later mentions of King Crimson, the Pixies, and Modest Mouse are closer to the mark.

Mostly what we're presented with in *The Guilt Trippers* is a bunch of aging hosers who enjoy hanging out and smoking weed. Despite the band being together for five years, songwriter and supposedly brilliant talent Dean can barely remember the lyrics to their five songs, and they've yet to record a demo. Maybe that's the point – that the members of the band are presented as cautionary tales, crusty veteran musicians looking down the barrel at a life of failed dreams, lack of marketable skills, niggling addictions, and chronic poverty.

What it's really about is the challenges of coupledness and raising children in the often cramped quarters of this city. As such, it's a bit of a bipolar beast, veering between dank jam space and cozy homefront, edgy fantasy and wholesome



LAWRENCE FAFARD

reality. And yet, in a *Mile End Kicks* kind of way, it feels like a cute romanticization of the lifestyle and an ode to escape-hatch musical dilettantism. The debauchery that Moe feels guilty about is mostly limited to weed, smokes, some mushrooms, and a few dabs of MDMA – nothing very heavy or menacing.

The ending suffers from an excess of clunky metaphoritis, replete with cracks in the jam space's foundation and literal walls falling down. But not to worry, dear reader, redemption is at hand, and we learn that the burnt-out Dean has a good heart and a heroic nature. He somehow even manages, post-disaster, to seduce a young nursing student from his hospital bed, addressing her as "Deary" while sarcophagused in multiple casts. Quite a feat, and one that stretches credulity – much like the fantasy jam space quickie with a young rock chick ("...as she comes..." is wishful thinking), whose moral repercussions Moe never seems to grapple very hard with.

Mineau does granular description and existential questioning better than he does fictional scene-setting. The most touching moments are when the musicians open up to each other about their vulnerabilities. I could have used more such emotional gravity. On the flip side, I did wonder why, at one point, I was reading twenty pages of graphic detail about a toddler's penis infection.

Mineau writes with an admirable flow – always harder than it seems – and should be commended for taking a crack at fertile material that merits further exploration. Much of the book is engaging. But in a city that's spawned the likes of Godspeed, Duchess Says, and Backxwash, the portrait feels a little bro-y and conventional, strangely denuded of the qualities that make Montreal stand out – more CHOM 97.7 than CISM or CKUT. **mb**

Alexander Hackett is a writer and occasional Morrissey impersonator from Quebec's Eastern Townships. He lives in Montreal.

Conflicting Currents

And Then Again Begin

H. Nigel Thomas

Guernica Editions

\$24.95, paperback, 200pp

9781778490200

H. Nigel Thomas' *And Then Again Begin* is a realist psychological novel set in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines about conflicting currents of history and intimacy. The main characters are Millington and Paul, a Black, gay married couple from the West Indies, Millington's aunt Pearl, and Millington's mother, Mem. Millington and Paul return to tell Mem that they're gay and married. Homophobia is a very serious problem in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Same-sex sexual acts remain illegal on the islands under English colonial laws, carrying penalties of five to ten years of imprisonment, and while these laws are officially unenforced, violent homophobic attacks on gay men are a constant threat.

Thomas explores his characters' motivations with extraordinary compassion. He does not shy away from uncomfortable aspects of émigré West Indian experience as Pearl and Millington think through their families' lives: "That Black men behaved like this during slavery was understandable.

Then, they were chattel and were rewarded for being studs and breeders who increased their owners' wealth. But now? You wonder too why women allow themselves to be used like that, until you remember that they've been conditioned to do so." The writing gives one a strong sense of a photographic tonal self-discipline, unwilling to distort in anyone's favour.

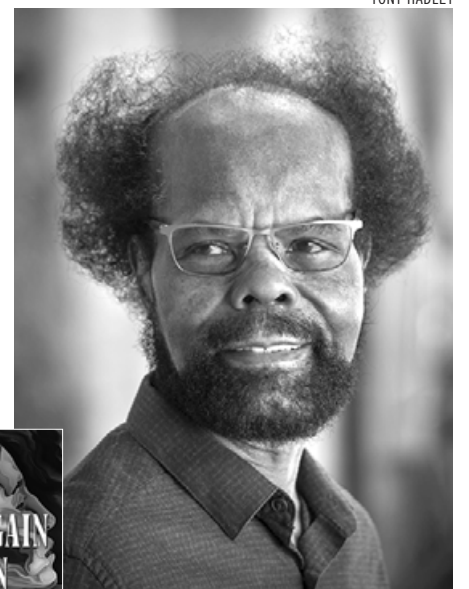
In the long moments of conversation and deliberation, these characters decide who they will be. Will Millington and Paul manage to resolve the problems in their marriage, which have their roots in sexual repression? Can their community, and Mem, accept them? Thomas' characters are refreshingly discerning about the currents of ideology and history they swim in. Also refreshingly, they're angry with the injustice of the limitations placed on them. There must be space for this kind of anger.

And Then Again Begin is a natural companion to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, a foundational text in post-colonial theory. Fanon's book, like Thomas', describes what it's like for a Black man educated abroad to return to the Caribbean island of his birth. Fanon writes, "In the French Antilles the bourgeoisie does not use Creole, except when speaking to servants. At school the young Martinican is taught to treat the

dialect with contempt. Avoid Creolisms." The code-switching of racialized dual consciousness is notoriously difficult, tinged with racially enforced shame. One learns to purge one's natural sounds, vocabulary, and grammar. What Thomas does not dwell on, though he would have every right to, is that this is painful, a kind of self-mutilation, not unlike the inner conflict produced by being closeted, lying about who one is, about love and intimacy, putting on a daily, odious performance under the threat of violence.

Any writer attempting to transcribe verbal dialect has to contend with the struggle between tonal realism and stereotype. The naturalism Thomas achieves in narrated Creole is very moving. It has the effect of dismantling the perception that there is something wrong with speech that reflects history – actually, it's beautiful language.

Mem's character is heartbreaking, specific and given detailed physicality, but also a familiar archetype: the religious, elderly mother whose life is defined by long hours of physical labour, and who in terms of her intellectual life and social mobility never stood a chance. Thomas lights the difficulty of this material with the same grace his characters give one another, which comes from the sincere hope for a better world. In this novel, pastors sometimes stand



TONY HADLEY



open to heterodox truth, and take risks to help families heal. Neighbours tend to one another in sickness and sit together through crisis. Thomas' realism is uncynical – the intimacy between his characters is very often one of restoration, studied fairness. These individuals, like their societies, hang in the balance. We watch, as we watch ourselves, to see what will prevail. **mb**

Elisabeth 이경희 Gill is a freelance writer based in Montreal. She's written for the *Toronto Star*, the *Montreal Gazette*, *Chatelaine*, CBC, and *Cult MTL*. Her poetry has been published in *The Malahat Review*. You can find her online @mercilessplot or at www.elisabethgill.com.

Art for Entertainment's Sake

Lavender Spike

Rachel Tremblay

ECW Press

\$24.95, paperback, 384pp

9781770418417

In *Lavender Spike*, Montreal author Rachel Tremblay describes the post-apocalyptic city of Etching, where art has been turned into a drug, a source of endless wealth for those who produce it and an addictive scourge for its users. After a deadly revolution known as the Great Burn, Etching stands divided. At its centre lies Mahl City, a sheltered metropolis where artists known as Triggers are worshipped by their happily addicted fans; outside its fortifications are the Dumps, where those who refuse to give in to the addiction live in fear of the city's art dealers. This is where we meet our protagonist. Izzy is a Purist, an artist trained before the Great Burn whose paintings, though not addictive, are rather bland. When her studio is ransacked, Izzy finds herself in the midst of an uprising – she is sent into Mahl City to impersonate a Trigger and help the Half-Light Rebels bring equality to Etching. But given the chance to finally



ROGER PROULX

"make someone feel... *something*," will she be able to resist the appeal of life as a Trigger artist?

The greatest strength of this book, one of many new publications blending elements of science fiction, fantasy, and romance, is Tremblay's evocative portrayal of art addiction. While no Trigger artwork is ever actually described, the reader is gripped by the visceral feelings these pieces elicit in the

characters who experience them. Our tongues loll as we drool, crawling along the floor of an art-filled Mahl City apartment alongside Joanie, Izzy's best friend. We taste the erotic zing of an "artcard" as the city's dictator Skylah runs her fingers along its printed details and her own body. Equally convincing is Izzy's complete devotion to the power of art, which allows her to become a bridge between Purists and Triggers.

Unfortunately, just as the "lavender spike oil" evoked in the title is used as a natural paint solvent, so too has the plot of *Lavender Spike* been diluted. The reader never comes to understand why the Great Burn took place, or why Trigger and Purist artists must compete. Mahl City does not depend on the Dumps for any resources; people in the outskirts are seemingly repressed for no financial or even artistic gain. While a rebellion against meaningless poverty is certainly understandable, the connection between art and the Half-Light struggle is essentially nonexistent. This political upheaval, presented as central to the plot, is also crammed into the last quarter of the book, where the pace suddenly picks up and Mahl City falls by the power of one contrivance after another.

One also finds it difficult to understand the needless sexualization of women in Tremblay's writing, especially since the story is largely told from the perspective of an (allegedly) heterosexual

woman. Yet, Izzy pays more attention to "the undersides of [Joannie's] bare breasts" or a "woman in black cut-off jean shorts, her bottom cheeks peeking out," than to her male love interest. Given the presence of other queer characters, by the time we reach the single, cringe-worthy sex scene, the reader cannot really be blamed for their disbelief.

These kinds of flaws are endemic to many contemporary YA and romantasy books, which abandon the philosophical foundations of the genre fiction they draw upon. Instead, they posit literature as a form of escapism rather than an arena in which to confront social problems. Tremblay, for instance, does not push her fiction far enough to seriously consider the commodification of art or the challenges of romantic relationships between members of different social classes. Nevertheless, there is nothing wrong with a little entertainment. *Lavender Spike* indulges in a dystopian fantasy of what the world might be like if artists, rather than lawyers, bankers, or programmers, were revered in society. If you enjoyed TV shows like *Arcane* (2021) and *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* (2022) or even Melissa Marr's *Wicked Lovely* (2007), then *Lavender Spike* may be your brand of reprieve. **mb**

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

Technicolor Noir

The Longest Death
Kevin Jagernauth
House of Anansi
\$26.99, paperback, 320pp
9781487013950

I remember finding myself in a half-heated debate with a friend last year about reading, or more specifically its purpose. Though open to persuasion, our viewpoints essentially boiled down to this. His: the act of reading should, first and foremost, be a brain-swelling pursuit of knowledge; and mine: to read is to primarily seek the warm embrace of escapism. I, after all, am an individual who survived lockdown by working my way through Jilly Cooper's "bonkbuster" catalogue. How special, then, to just for a moment step away from our crumbling world and into one of noir.

In 1950s Riverton, an apple pie-shaped slice of Americana, a miscellaneous host of characters trudge through the inertia of small-town life. Richard works at Eddy & Dowd Safe Deposit Company and seeks his thrills by stealing petty cash from his employer. That is, until smooth-talking, light-fingered Marlon waltzes into town, steals his heart, and (just as every good partner should) shows Richard that he is worth more. Why steal a few bucks when you could rob the whole damn vault? It's heart-warming stuff.

It is a vivid world that Jagernauth paints, a misty landscape replete with an identity parade that would not be out of place in a game of Clue – including, but not limited to, a rogue cop turned PI, an enigmatic pawnshop owner, a nosy diner waitress, an eager car salesman, and a paranoid tycoon. Gloria, the novel's femme fatale figure (rendered with the kind of bus-stopping, jaw-dropping beauty only male writers seem capable of dreaming up) catches wind of the plot, and plans between the three ensue. With their common goal of escaping Riverton and lives that don't fit quite right, the trio share a kind of exceptionality that seemingly stems from social "otherness." The queer love story is a modern twist, and furnishes the novel's chilly atmosphere with tender sparks of warmth. Indeed, Richard and Marlon's relationship feels refreshingly... normal. Supporting characters are remarkably unfazed and the only blatant moment of homophobia that occurs (in a gun store, of course) is promptly, and satisfactorily, avenged.

The novel's defining trait is its Technicolor catalogue of hard-boiled slang, an ambitious feat in and of itself. The noir lexicon is marvellously theatrical; it leaps and dances across the pages, requiring the same level of concentration one might reserve for a Sunday crossword. Though there is pleasure to be found in decoding dialect relegated to a different



MARTIN REISCH



stretch of history, at times its employment is heavy-handed, resulting in moments of spoof that make it difficult to fully immerse into the story. Lexicon aside, Jagernauth's writing is an acquired taste; it is thoughtful, tense. Through lingering looks, and feelings of dread and paranoia, Jagernauth gently tugs us into his hard-bitten, slow-moving noir playbook.

However, the novel's third act is its strongest. The heist materializes, deteriorates and, in a frustratingly bathetic turn of events, a version of the sought-after "dream" finally manifests. It is an unsatisfactory conclusion and deliberately so. Jagernauth leans into the cynicism of his chosen genre, revealing the aspirational, illusory nature of the American Dream.

Indeed, while there is a case to be made that novels like *The Longest Death* belong to another epoch (certainly the aesthetic qualities alone make it an acquired taste), perhaps what is so interesting about this novel, so firmly planted in its "retro-ness," is its contemporaneity with the moment of late-stage capitalism in which we now find ourselves (in which case, Jagernauth's fiction is not entirely the sweet release of escapism I initially had it pigeonholed as). Given noir originated in the turbulent conditions and disillusionment of the post-war years, there is a certain allegorical characteristic to the novel's anticlimactic deflation of narrative – be this Jagernauth's intention or not. The longest death may, in fact, just be life. Like those who came before him, Jagernauth uses noir as a tool through which to suggest that there is little point deigning to believe in upward mobility in a system designed to relentlessly attrit the human spirit. After all, it's the hope that'll kill ya. **msb**

Evie Faber is a British writer and editor based in Montreal. Her recently published thesis examines certain novels as artifacts of truth amidst mainstream (neo-colonial and capitalist) narratives of evil. She loves beer and takes her Letterboxd reviews too seriously.

Worlds Within

Mind the Gap
Alice Zorn
NeWest Press
\$23.95, paperback, 334pp
9781774391341

In Mexico City, a Canadian woman with a visibly contorted gait is emboldened by the example of Frida Kahlo, whose rich life was built around her own severe disabilities. A moose-hunting trip in Gaspé helps a Montreal man accept life changes. A Montreal teenager searches for her past in a cemetery in Guanajuato.

Although the back cover describes it as "travel fiction," *Mind the Gap* is better served by Zorn's well-chosen epigraph, presented in French (from the Icelandic original): "*Ce qui échappe à notre entendement rend le monde plus vaste.*" In my translation: What escapes our understanding makes the world larger. Indeed, this book is about expanding the worlds inside us.

As any reader of literary journals knows, travel stories are often resorted to by aspiring writers searching for interesting material. They exoticize, using the foreign setting as an easy hook.

Zorn's stories are the sophisticated opposite, their vivid sense of place integral to the action. Her travellers are not simply tourists seeking to consume the strange. Instead, they are strangers, provoked into a state of sensitivity by their inevitable exclusion – their *own* difference driving the plots and the development of the characters.

The unfamiliar surroundings of a Tunisian vacation impose new constraints on a teenager already testing parental limits (no crop tops!) – then offer an opportunity for a grand middle-finger gesture of independence. In a Texas roadside *taquería* strung with fairy lights wired to coloured shotgun shells, a man in pointed cowboy boots challenges Vance with stereotypes of Canada; in this unfriendly dive, he is as much a cultural outsider as any of Zorn's characters in North Africa. In the layered title story, a Canadian child is sent to Austria to meet extended family. Barbara must help with housework; a girl would need these skills when she married. "I wasn't sure about that," Zorn writes, "especially if getting married meant living between the stove, the sink, the bucket, and the washing machine." The claustrophobia of traditional wifedom, deftly evoked.

With seven stories and a novella, the book nicely balances cohesiveness



ROBERT ADUBE



and variety. Relationships are key, often multiple, with protagonists seeking – or seeking to avoid – self-

knowledge. Zorn skilfully lets us see what the characters cannot, including blind spots of gender, culture, and class.

"The Land of Clouds" (the traditional Mixtec name for Oaxaca) is perhaps an exception, a story of arriving at a sense of belonging through friendship. It is a beautiful story. Zorn's writing often engages with art and craft and here she shines brightest. A Montreal textile conservator meets a Oaxacan weaver who specializes in the rare and ethereal practice of *tlāmachtentli*, or feather weaving, an almost-lost traditional art. Travelling alone with little Spanish, Patricia shows openness, humility, and willingness to adapt to the place and people, serving as a quiet and very moving example of how relationships across differences can be connections of the heart.

Zorn is not as well known for her deeply crafted work as she deserves, although her first book appeared in 2009 and she has been publishing steadily since, earning prizes and other recognition. One source of pleasure for a faithful reader of Zorn is how her writing, which started out awfully good, reaches new levels of accomplishment with each book. The best stories in *Mind the Gap* are as fine as are to be found anywhere, full of fresh, apt images and sensitive observation. With sharply detailed, precise language, Zorn conjures a parade of cars carrying moose carcasses along a Gaspé highway as beautifully as she summons the nighttime murmurs of birds that will, come morning, sing the sun up into the sky. **msb**

Elise Moser is a writer and editor in Montreal. She started reading Alice Zorn's books before they met. They often walk by the river together.

graphic

Parts and the Whole

Opioids & Organs
Arizona O'Neill
Drawn & Quarterly
\$35, hardcover, 380pp
9781770468450

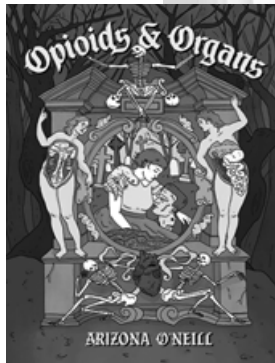
It's not uncommon for a book's dedication to carry a certain emotional poignancy. In the case of Arizona O'Neill's stunning debut graphic memoir, though, it's more like a full-on emotional wallop. "To the parts of my father still out in the world," the dedication reads, and therein lie tales within tales.

O'Neill, thirty-one, grew up in Montreal estranged from her father, who was largely lost to the world of addiction until he died of a fentanyl overdose in 2015. As next of kin, O'Neill was called upon to decide the fate of her father's organs; vulnerable, grieving, and pressured, she signed the necessary consent forms and the decision was made. But that was only the beginning. Something didn't sit right. "It did not take me long," she writes, "to start feeling guilty about having given his organs back to a society that does not care about addicts."

Opioids & Organs is essentially O'Neill's account of fighting through that guilt and getting to its root causes. Early on, a hard truth was apparent: you don't see organs – hearts and eyes and all the others – migrating from the rich to the poor. No, somehow when it comes to the movement of organs along the lines of the human class divide, all the traffic is in the opposite direction.

The book effectively becomes a road novel, both literal and metaphysical. Along the way, O'Neill discovers that her position entails a double bind: not only do you inevitably feel guilty, you can end up feeling guilty about feeling guilty. Harvested organs, after all, are literally saving lives, and their procurement is always a time-sensitive matter, to put it mildly. Is there really any good reason to hinder the process? The question hangs in the air, and it's a big part of the book's power that O'Neill allows the ambiguity to stand.

A big part of what makes *Opioids & Organs* unique is the freedom O'Neill



JULIE ARTACHO

allows herself – freedom to go down narrative paths that might at first look like dead ends (hint: they're *not* dead ends, though some prove more fruitful than others) and, maybe most daringly, to bring a comic element – that's comic as in comical, not as in comix – to what many might reasonably assume to be a subject utterly resistant to the very idea of levity. Never mind gallows humour. This is *post-gallows* humour.

Tonally, the range of what O'Neill is doing calls for the kinds of shifts and hard turns that can make a creative

writing teacher weep. One minute, you might be deep in reflection regarding the very nature of life and death; the next, you'll be chortling at the wisecracks of a talking lizard. But O'Neill is a sure hand at the wheel. The real, the unreal and the surreal end up coexisting amiably; they meld into each other with a seamlessness that comes to feel almost natural.

In the tradition of her mother, acclaimed novelist Heather O'Neill, the author shows a deep-rooted love and affinity for Montreal: its architecture, its history, its outcasts and iconoclasts. It should hardly need saying that the book is a visual feast. O'Neill is a masterful drafter of line; the results often verge on breathtaking, especially when panel sizes accommodate a profusion of detail.

The book itself, with its embossed hard cover, heavy-stock paper, and deep, rich colour palette, is an *objet d'art* in its own right. Panel shapes come in all permutations and combinations, their fluidity arising organically from narrative and thematic needs.

Structurally speaking, it might have been easy for O'Neill to resort to blocks of context-setting expository writing. Instead, she chooses to have all the text embedded solely as attributed dialogue. Not only does this keep the story moving along crisply, it enhances the sense of a Greek chorus of empathy, of a father's legacy making its way out into the world via the tribute of the daughter he barely knew, one voice at a time. Or – as will surely be the case now, and in increasing numbers – one reader at a time. **mb**

Ian McGillis is a novelist, editor, and Expos loyalist who lives in Montreal.

Rage for Change

Beware Her Fury
Mirion Malle
Translated by Aleshia Jensen and Isadora Jensen
Drawn & Quarterly
\$35, paperback, 224pp
9781770468702



Over the past decade, it's felt as though the trickle-down of feminist thought into everyday language has done a sort of rehabilitation of the place of emotions in public life. The writing of bell hooks, for instance, surged across the 2010s, popularizing her theory of love as a tool for liberation, and in 2015, the influential American philosopher Martha Nussbaum wrote a book about the role of love in civic discourse. But where the public has been quick to embrace the transformative power of love, there has been more resistance to the idea of the political import of anger – even as it becomes a more and more justifiable response to current events. Is anger necessarily destructive and isolating? Or can it, like love, be used as a force for change?

Mirion Malle's *Beware Her Fury* uses female rage to make a bid for the latter. The story opens on a terrasse, where our shaggy-haired, stick-and-poke-clad protagonist is cussing out a man for overstaying his conversation with two seventeen-year-olds. On her way off, a man chastises her for not smiling more. By the time she meets up with her friends, she's seething. Thus is she introduced: "Clémence, who is always angry."

For Clémence, though, the anger isn't a choice, and she resists the characterization. Indeed, she confides

to a friend that she fears her rage is "consuming" her. Readers quickly learn that Clémence is beginning group therapy for survivors of sexual assault, and that while her anger often incites her to action – such as her impassioned defence of the two girls at the beginning of the story – it just as frequently leaves her paralyzed, evidenced in panel montages that show Clémence alternately going about her day and disassociating with fury in front of her phone, fidgeting, picking at her hair and skin as headlines stack up. This fine balance between rage that burns, and rage that burns out, is the balance Clémence must learn to strike.

It's not easy, especially when reminders of patriarchal violence abound. But through conversations in group, support from friends, and vulnerability in a new relationship, Clémence begins to recover her relationship with anger as a productive rather than destructive force.

There is a sense in which *Beware* feels as though it's all aftermath. We see the reverberations of assault on Clémence's day-to-day, and there are references to a catatonic depression "last winter." There's the sense of a rock bottom, and that Clémence is no longer there. It's as though the story opens just as the narrative swing ticks upwards, and we follow Clémence through a mostly frictionless recovery: her friends discuss serious topics while remaining lighthearted, group therapy is a

hit off the bat, and Clémence finds herself in a new, healthy relationship that offers not only space, but strategies for navigating her complex emotions.

While some readers could complain of a lack of narrative tension – literally, it feels like nothing in this book goes wrong – I appreciated the ethical and creative choice to not depict Clémence's assault in service of the narrative.

Indeed, if there were an antithesis to the trauma plot, or to tropes where gratuitous sexual assault is recruited in the service of moving the narrative forwards, it would be this. Likewise, Clémence's assailant receives little characterization, with Malle swapping an identifiable antagonist for a structural one. We only hear briefly that he is a "vaguely known" YouTuber, and the son of a certain "someone" in the public eye. These are juicy details to include, and doing so without elaborating feels like an intentional and refreshing baiting and subversion of the reader's expectations.

Like Malle's past work *So Long, Sad Love* (also translated by Aleshia Jensen), *Beware Her Fury* is a book that could be said to jump straight to the part of the story where things get better. Malle's storytelling shines in its believable, candid dialogue, and there is something about her characters and settings, though at times minimally rendered, that feel

recognizable and undeniably Montréalais. And while the story, too, is familiar, it offers something new: a reminder that anger is often a response to injustice, especially at the expense of those we love.

As to whether love or anger will lead the revolution, *Beware Her Fury* makes no strong distinction. Rather, it encourages us to think more deeply about the relationship between the two. **mb**

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



By Toula Drimonis

Guy Rex Rodgers

Underdog Days

Documentary film director Guy Rex Rodgers hadn't initially planned on writing a book, but following the 2022 launch of his film *What We Choose to Remember*, which explores the stories of English-speaking communities in Quebec, and after touring for three years and screening the film to fifty-five communities across the province, he knew he needed to.

What We Choose to Forget is the product of the testimonials he heard and offers a well-researched, highly informative and balanced account of Quebec's English-speaking communities. The book is a detailed geographical and historical portrait of the non-francophone presence in the province: their history, their accomplishments, their dreams, and their aspirations. Rodgers showcases this parallel reality without minimizing or dismissing the linguistic and cultural insecurity that francophones continue to experience in anglocentric North America.

Both the documentary and the book seek to dispel the myth of the "pampered anglo elite" always cited by nationalists as representing all English-speaking Quebecers, and offer a far more balanced and nuanced look at the province's history. They also aim to see what English-speaking Quebecers' sense of belonging is here and how they define themselves.

As founding Executive Director of the English Language Arts Network (ELAN) in Quebec and co-founder of the Quebec Writers' Federation (QWF), Rodgers spent decades connecting and creating opportunities for English-speaking artists in the province. He was ideally suited to delve into the thorny issues of identity and belonging in Quebec for a community whose contributions have often been minimized or ignored.

"Quebec is the land of 'Je me souviens,' Rodgers says, "yet it's remarkable what its inhabitants do not remember or have chosen to forget."

During the cross-province tour, while Rodgers was being exposed to an incredible depth and diversity of first-person accounts during post-screening discussions, the CAQ government was

simultaneously cracking down on Quebec's English-speaking communities by introducing Bill 96, legislation strengthening Quebec's Charter of the French Language.

The Canadian-born, Australian-raised filmmaker and now author knew the story wasn't finished, and the first seeds of *What We Choose to Forget* were planted.

"A film is brief, and you can only choose a few people who can only say a few things," says Rodgers. "The book was an opportunity to go much deeper and offer more diversity of experiences."

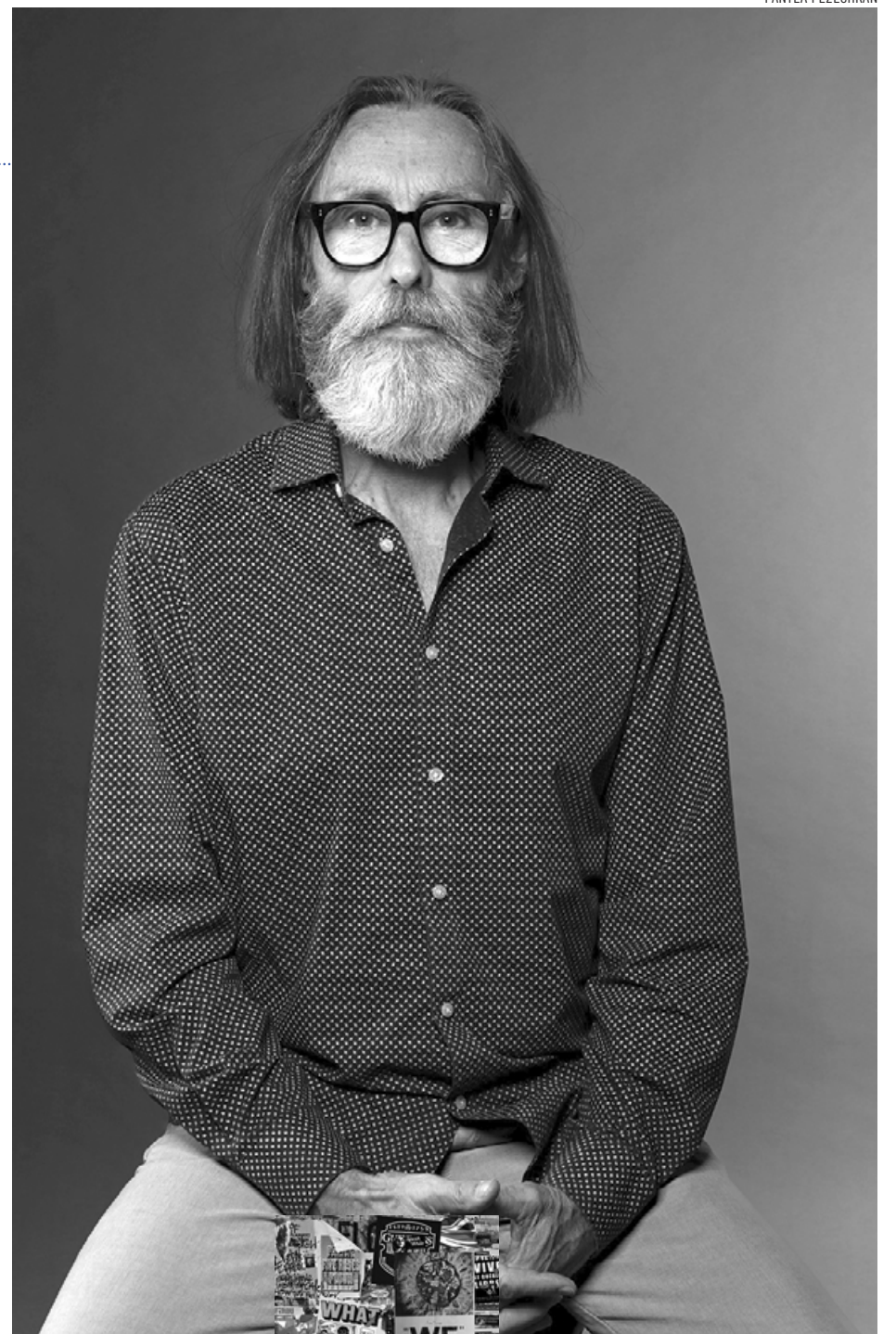
Rodgers recorded all of the conversations, which he refers to as "therapeutic." "Bill 96 was shifting the mood from a positive and proud look back at the previous half-century," he says, "and what we non-francophones have contributed to Quebec, to this sense of 'My god, it's starting again.'"

He started mapping out the book in his head. The tour ended in December 2024. By January he was writing. "It just came pouring out," he says.

As Rodgers puts it: "It's a story of lovable underdogs, all struggling to preserve their histories, languages, and cultures. Their tragedy is what they have chosen to forget – about themselves and each other."

The immensely readable book is for anyone trying to understand Quebec a little better, and takes its place among many others written that offer a less monolithic version of this province. A "one-stop way to put a lot of complex ideas in an accessible way in one place," he says.

What We Choose to Forget presents a clear and concise history of English settlements and the contributions of English speakers across Quebec, with six



of the nine chapters focused on the province's regions.

Rodgers' choice to show population census numbers for many of these Quebec communities shows the unequivocal and stark decline of Quebec's English-speaking population throughout the province, which Rodgers says explains not only the sense of loss they feel, but also why these communities feel a sense of ownership here too.

Yet, because of the charged political rhetoric – the danger of "the single story," as coined by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie to describe how oversimplified, narrow narratives create stereotypes – unbalanced narratives often treat Quebec's English-speaking communities as invaders and as not really belonging here, and their concerns and worries are often mocked or dismissed.

Such concerns have only been amplified with recent stringent government policies aiming to crack down on English in Quebec even more.

In his capacity as executive director of ELAN, Rodgers has visited multiple educational institutions across Quebec over the years, and says that in the past younger Quebecers would roll their eyes when he would talk about language issues.

Bill 96 and the CAQ government's hardline stance against anything that

What We Choose to Forget
Guy Rex Rodgers
ELAN
\$25, paperback, 314pp
9781067398101

wasn't French shifted something in Quebec. "Suddenly, while touring the film in 2024," says Rodgers, "when the CAQ was cracking down on too many international students and what they felt was too much English and raising university fees, it did matter. New immigrants or even long-established young multigenerational Quebecers fluent in French were questioning their place here. To me, that was absolutely shocking."

Rodgers doesn't see current language battles in Quebec as English versus French, but a battle between unilingualism and multilingualism. "One thing that immigrants have in common," he says, "is a great respect for languages. And most of them speak two or three languages."

"People are not opposed to French," Rodgers adds. "They like French. They live in Quebec because French matters to them. However, they have no intention of becoming unilingual francophones, and that's not a big wish for their children or grandchildren either. Even if they went to French schools and became pretty

continued on page 17

Labour of Love

Charity & Sylvia
Tillie Walden
Drawn & Quarterly
\$38, hardcover, 264pp
9781770468382

In February 1807, Charity Bryant arrives in Weybridge, Vermont, to visit her church friend Polly, whose unmarried sister, Sylvia Drake, lives with her, helping to care for her many children. Charity is fleeing a devastating breakup and, wherever she goes, gossip follows “like dirt on a hem.” Rumours abound that she harbours a strange interest in women.

Charity & Sylvia tells the true story of the forty-four-year relationship between Bryant and Drake. With an entrepreneurial spirit, Charity eventually starts a tailoring business in Vermont, enlisting Sylvia’s help. The pair appear together in public and at church. Yet Sylvia’s mother condemns her daughter’s situation as a disgrace, while her sister finds it uncommon but tolerable, trusting the sincerity of their faith.

Drawing on diaries, letters, and archival materials, Tillie Walden evokes the vivid world of Charity and Sylvia in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New England, where toil, death, and religion loom large. The award-winning graphic novelist renders this world in intricate black-and-white drawings, set within twelve-panel pages, with a wash of sepia to suggest the faded hues of the past. She further enhances the narrative



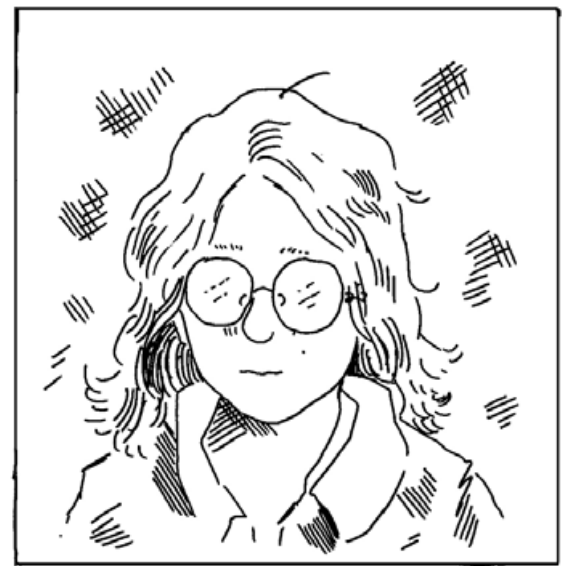
with interwoven maps, anecdotes, and historical facts, adding depth to daily life in the period. Walden’s work succeeds as a richly grounded, deeply affecting portrait of love, labour, and religious anxiety.

To call the condition of women in this period a plight is almost an understatement. They toil without respite, tending large families and keeping hearth and home. Walden often depicts mothers hard-pressed to maintain a semblance of order. Charity and Sylvia, too, labour ceaselessly at their tailoring business, and it eventually flourishes, allowing them to establish a home of their own. In contrast, their lives are markedly less burdened than those of their sisters and sisters-in-law, whose days are consumed by the demands of children.

Beyond this unending labour, the lives of Charity and Sylvia are shaped by birth and loss. Both Sylvia and Charity are the eighth-born children of their respective families. Sylvia’s family is poorer: five of her siblings are sent to work as children and adolescents in the homes of relatives or the more affluent, while most of Charity’s siblings, along with her mother, die young.

Though surrounded by loss, Sylvia and Charity live long lives yet remain troubled by what awaits them after death. Sylvia, the more devout of the two, fears that they live in sin and is haunted by visions of hellfire – scenes Walden renders through darkness, flames, fallen angels, and the devil himself. Charity reassures Sylvia that they are good Christian souls, yet years later confesses that she still feels persistent shame and that she, too, fears their fate. This tension between fear and fate makes the ending all the more compelling.

The artistry of Walden’s panels is consistently strong throughout, and their richness in period detail draws the reader into an immersive and convincingly rendered world. Although it is impossible to determine



a definitive standout, “They Will Very Nearly Die” and “Hurry, Hurry, Hurry” are the most memorable panels for me. Walden admits to having filled in some gaps in the story, yet the work nevertheless feels meticulously researched. Even on a third reading, I continued to glean new details.

My only significant criticism relates to the number of characters, especially those with similar names or younger characters named after the deceased, which can be confusing at times. This remains a minor concern, as the similar names reflect the complexity of the two large families.

Overall, *Charity & Sylvia* is a thoroughly engaging work that rewards both slow reading and rereading, its layered narrative bringing these two figures vividly to life. **B+**

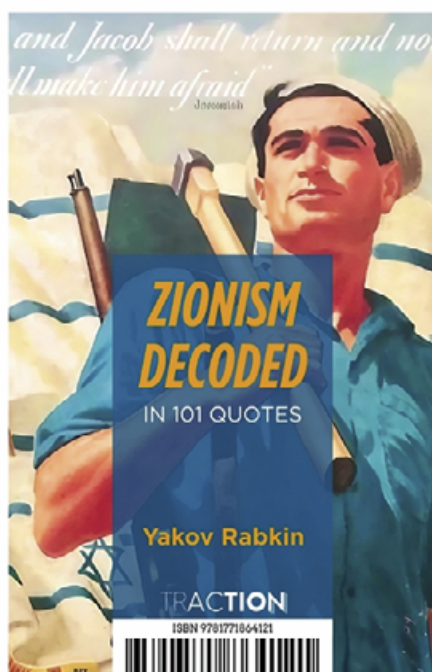
Heather Leighton has written for *The Globe and Mail* and *The Comics Journal*.

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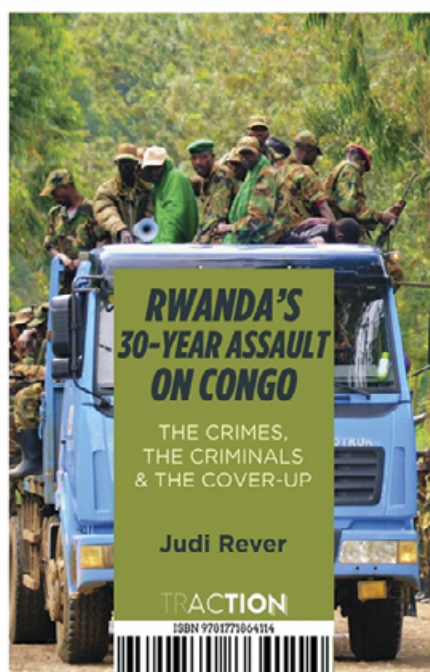
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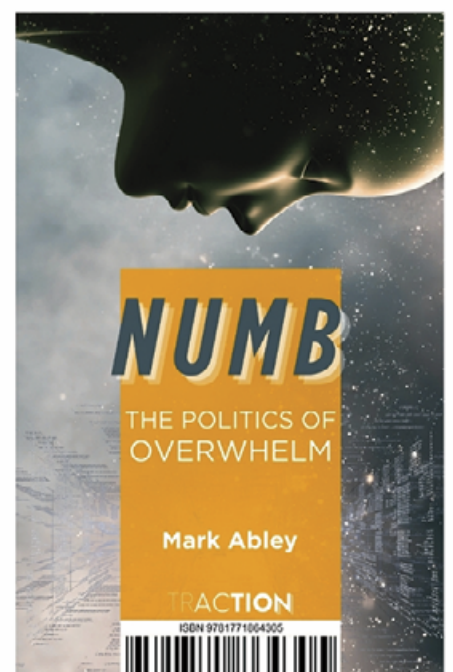
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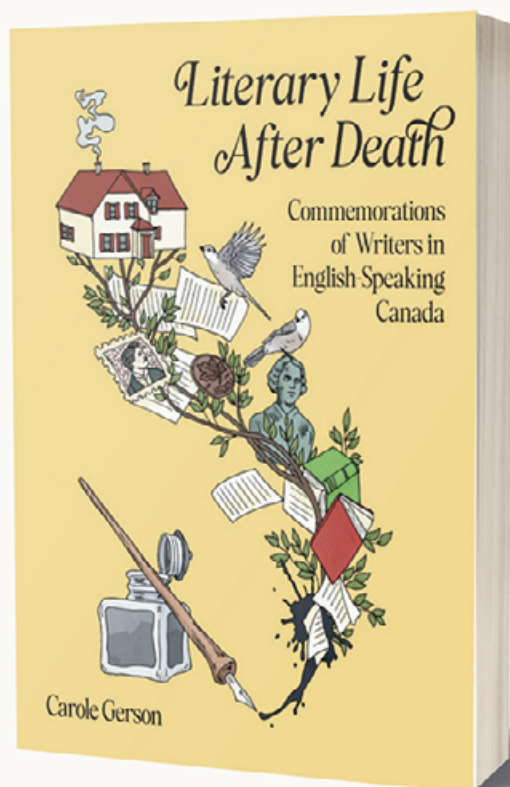
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Canada has always been a junior partner; first to Britain then the US. Are we at all equipped to deal with American threats in a new multipolar world? **Peter McFarlane** is not so sure.



We are exhausted, we are overwhelmed, we are numb. Numbness is a desirable goal for tyrants, as it narrows the possibilities for revolt. **Mark Abley** explores why politics and society is overwhelming.



Literary Life After Death

Commemorations of Writers in
English-Speaking Canada
Carol Gerson

Commemorations of deceased writers can often take on a life of their own, from the stately and serious to the kitschy and commercial. In *Literary Life After Death*, Carole Gerson categorizes and analyzes the ways in which writers have been commemorated in Canada to show how tributes have changed over time and in response to evolving national and social concerns. Brimming with examples and discussions of dozens of writers, *Literary Life After Death* takes an expansive and often-amusing approach to literary studies and cultural history.

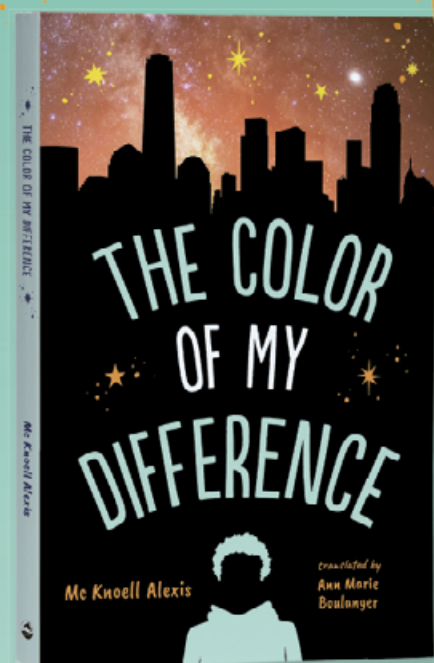
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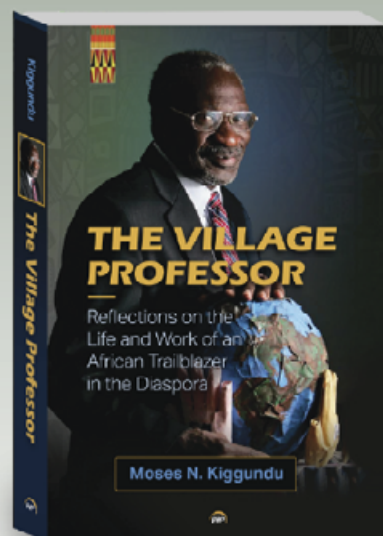


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THE VILLAGE PROFESSOR

Reflections on the Life and Work of an
African Trailblazer in the Diaspora

MOSES N. KIGGUNDU, member of the Nkima Clan is Distinguished Research Professor and Professor Emeritus, Management and International Business, Sprott School of Business, cross appointed to the Institute of African Studies (IAS), Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.



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Details within Details

Village Dreams

Jay Quint

Guernica Editions

\$22.95, paperback, 200pp

9781778490323

Finding ourselves in a state of return, we tend to imagine or cling to familiar guideposts to situate ourselves within the narrative. We may see the City’s ghosts, which at times take on the shape of a darkened shadow cast down by a crumbling building, and yet, at other times, could appear as warm light itself, passing over the red and ivied brick. This is the point that Jay Quint’s *Village Dreams* expands from. Following a return to Montreal after what he believes to be a “Grand Failure” of his personal writing project, Quint is reminded of a Village cafe, and decides to revisit it. From there, he feels the lost touch of inspiration again, begins to be led down new paths by the city itself, and returns to the Village the following Saturday to repeat the gesture.

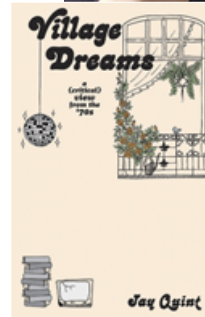
As the reader trails alongside the author’s interior and exterior

wanderings, we turn an ear towards the flâneur’s footfalls, allow ourselves to be guided on impulse along with him to a place where physical spaces open up to reveal where personal and political landscapes have formed. We are invited into the lush greens of Sainte-Rose, to lie down on a fresh patch of sunned grass. *Village Dreams* offers a space to read as a way of dreaming, waking up, and falling into dreams again. In this meditative, trancelike essay, presented through a unique form, incorporating the exploration of Montreal’s gay village in the summer, Quint presents his personal canon of queer writers and influential cultural critics alongside visual images of the Village using QR codes scattered throughout, creating a tangled picture of the past and present. A weblike return, which in turn recontextualizes the city’s spaces through their shared histories and living memory.

Village Dreams has a sharp focus on place, and especially the fringes. It asks: Who is showing up, declaring themselves here, documenting how arrival transforms the places we inhabit? Quint is both exacting and tender in his

observations of sprawling subject matter: spanning from the Beats, to camp, the hippies and the New Left movement, sixties idealistic kitsch and seventies informal urbanism. Quoting Didion – “So many encounters in those years were devoid of any logic save that of the dreamwork” – he disassembles any illusionary presentism we might come to expect in leftist discussions of the counterculture movements in the 1960s, while at the same time drawing our attention to the continuity and persistence of bohemian living in the modern day. Quint reminds us, “it was during this critical transitional period... that The Villages emerged.” Neither truly utopian nor pessimistic, *Village Dreams* records in an almost diaristic method, and the reader is immersed in the specificity of Quint’s world, even when the spell is broken.

In one moment, interrupted by a group of university protesters, Quint comments “that today’s degraded version of hipsterism has turned political in its intersection with an equally degraded student activism, is evident – that Saturday in The Village being just



another manifestation of it I would have preferred to be nowhere near.” And yet in another, he retraces his steps in order to compliment, and pay a visit to, the eccentric home of Monsieur Leo, a Village queen whose meeting he feels “was a reward for my own small deviation from the norm.” Just as one might reach their breaking point, frustrated with the world around them and their own place in it, the City might reveal – a street like Sainte-Rose, the friendly face of Monsieur Leo, the sense of inspiration towards something yet to come. mab

Ashton Diduck is a queer writer currently residing in Tiohtià:ke. He is currently the Communications Manager for *carte blanche*, and a poetry editor for *Ahoy*.

Flooding the Zone

Numb

The Politics of Overwhelm

Mark Abley

Baraka Books

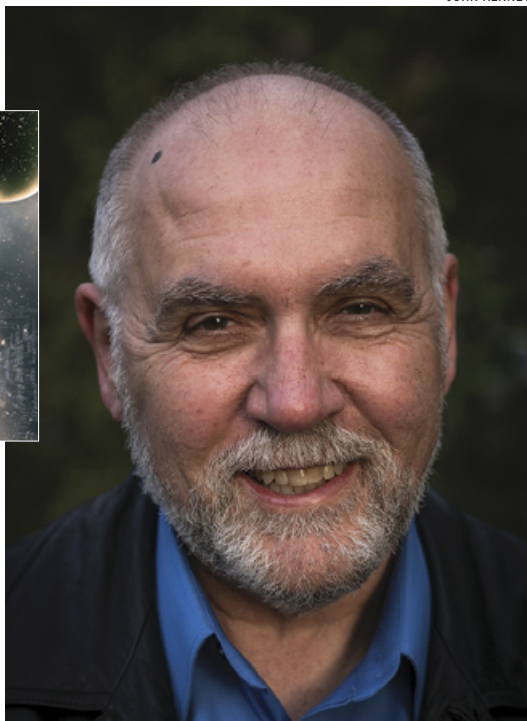
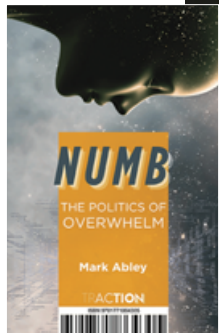
\$16.95, paperback, 114pp

9781771864305

“We are exhausted. We are overwhelmed. Worse, we are numb,” proclaims author Mark Abley in his book of the same name. Medically speaking, numbness is not often a natural state. Medical sources describe it as a “loss” – of feeling or sensation, a symptom of a larger problem. Feeling numb, in a metaphorical sense, is also often the result of some outside force, something larger that piles up day after day, week after week.

Numb: The Politics of Overwhelm reads like a personal, but polished, journal, reflecting on the headlines and news stories that have snowballed towards a profound numbness in its author. Gaza, Sudan, climate change, and, of course, Donald Trump form the four cornerstones of Abley’s numbing newsreel, though the U.S. president’s name is sardonically avoided in writing.

Acknowledging our deteriorating attention spans throughout the book, Abley does us a service by keeping his thesis to around ninety pages. Yes, *Numb* is more thesis than manifesto, though the question of genre ties into one of its shortcomings: it attempts to define an inherently subjective and personal phenomenon. Abley wishes to pin down this unique malaise he (and others) experiences, but in doing so he forgets to take a step



JOHN KENNEY

back, to see the forest from the trees. He is trying desperately to make sense of these four crises. Many will agree that two humanitarian disasters, an impending ecological collapse, and a rogue U.S. president have worn away at us, day in and day out. But aren’t there other subjects that would drive a news reader to despair? We hardly are reminded about the over seven million lives lost to COVID-19, the staggering levels of overdose deaths, or the structural and everyday racism facing BIPOC individuals and communities across Canada.

Beyond *Numb*’s four cornerstones of despair, hope does seep through the cracks. A recurring figure of said

hope is the late naturalist Jane Goodall, who Abley returns to often as someone who refused despair and numbness, who always *chose* to feel alive and hopeful. On top of another throughline of animal compassion, not to be spoiled in this review, Goodall’s commitment to hope speaks volumes to how we meet the present moment, and how we can, in fact, reconnect with the richest experiences of humanity.

Perhaps this is the greatest contribution of *Numb*. We can control ourselves. We can respond to and resist the maelstrom of violence and bigotry that drives so many of us to despair. One of the simplest ways to do this: read. Not just the news, but whole books. If mainstream media normalizes genocide and climate catastrophe right before our eyes, let’s counter the prevailing trend and take literacy into our own hands. If the persistence of this very publication is proof of anything, it is that as readers, we have power. If we see broadcasters trivializing catastrophes as everyday occurrences, we must renew our own media literacy and call out poor journalism to retain our sanity, and our hope. And if certain crises seem too overwhelming to read about, we must find ways to talk about and respond to them that honour loss and suffering without sacrificing the privilege of political action.

Abley’s slim thesis may not be the manifesto it aspired to, but rather a testament to the hallmark fatigue built up over the last few years of headlines. *Numb* does not articulate a clearly structured politics, as its full title suggests. It scratches the surface of a new media landscape that floods the zone and fractures its audience with politics meant to overwhelm, not inform. But the feeling of overwhelm is just that: a feeling. Though one we, as a society, desperately need new tools to overcome. mab

Jack McClelland is a writer and translator based in Ottawa.

WHAT WE CHOOSE TO FORGET:

A Quebec Story of Unshared Memories

Drawing on years of documentary filmmaking and conversations in more than fifty communities across the province, Rodgers examines how relations between francophones, anglophones, and allophones were shaped—not accidentally, but historically. His approach is patient, humane, and deeply grounded in lived experience, attentive to voices and histories that are too often missing from Quebec's dominant narrative.

Richard Walsh Smith
- Educator, writer and activist

Rodgers' work updates the historical conversation first established by Ronald Rudin's *The Forgotten Quebecers* and Clift and McLeod's *The English Fact in Quebec*. The inclusion of allophone voices is especially pertinent given the changing demographics of the province. For future historians, *What We Choose To Forget* will doubtless become indispensable to a historical understanding of Anglo-Quebec in the first half of the 21st century.

Raymond Jess PhD -
School of Irish Studies,
Concordia University

What We Choose to Forget is an impressive piece of work. Rodgers has a narrative skill that makes for a read that flows like water, at one level offering fly-on-the-wall descriptions of friendly encounters with a wide range of Quebecers, at another an eye-opening discovery of hidden truths they reveal about our history, or histories. Guy Rodgers is telling English Quebecers our history in a novel way. If you are part of it, the stories will make you proud and remind you that this is your home. If you are not part of it, they will show you that Quebec's English-speaking communities are a valuable part of the province's social, cultural, economic and political fabric.

Christopher Neal -
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RODGERS continued from page 11

much francophone, they retained their mother tongue and often did part of their studies in English, they're comfortable in two or more languages. It doesn't matter which [school] system they went through, their vision is united around seeing languages as a tool, as a strength, as an asset."

The author says even young francophones want to be part of the world and aim to be bilingual. "They need to find a way to define Quebec identity that isn't alienating or exclusionary," he says.

Rodgers doesn't believe Bill 96 does anything to support the French language in the province. In fact, the resentment created by the bill's overreach may even undermine it. What worries him is that there's no obvious mechanism to dial the legislation back.

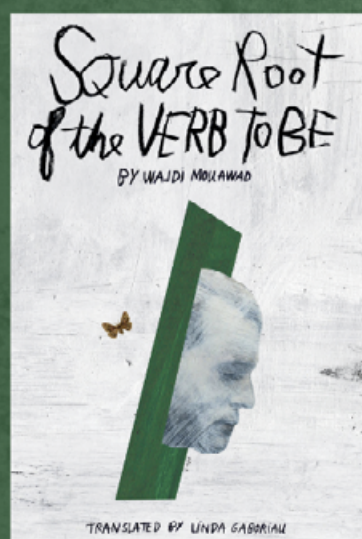
"There's nothing to be gained by any party by modifying, diluting, or correcting it," he says. "There's always points to be scored by saying, 'We're going to pass a new tough law for the anglos,' but if someone comes along and says, 'That was kind of excessive, we

should dial it back,' it comes at a terrible cost [politically] and a sort of questionable benefit to them. I don't see anybody with the wisdom, the vision, and the guts to do anything about it. And that worries me."

Despite his concerns, Rodgers still finds his insightful look into the depths and complexity of this community – these "unshared stories," as he calls them – fascinating and even reassuring in a certain way.

"There aren't a lot of angry anglophones," he says. "There's not a lot of divisiveness. It's just a lot of people saying, 'I like Quebec. I like it here. We're happy. We just want to get along and have our contributions recognized too.' Is that so much to ask?"

Toula Drimonis is a Montreal journalist, opinion columnist and author of two books, *We, the Others: Allophones, Immigrants, and Belonging in Canada*, and *Seeking Asylum: Building a Shareable World*, published by Linda Leith Publishing.



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SQUARE ROOT OF THE VERB TO BE

by Wajdi Mouawad
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Human Rights in the Rhythm of Rock

Protest Music of the 1980s & 1990s

G. Scott MacLeod

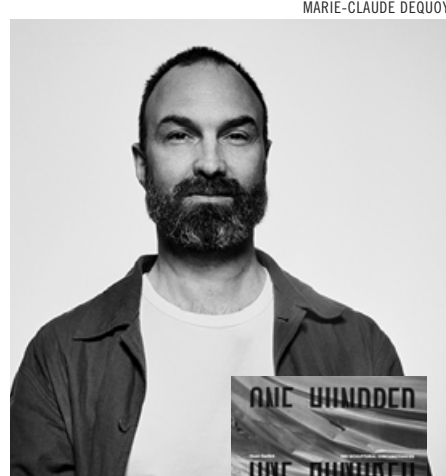
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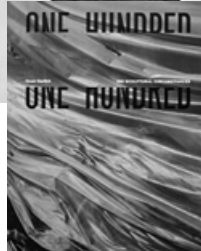
9781990402098

Montreal-based photographers share observations and memories in the city in two recently released photobooks. Through vernacular objects, Dean Garlick explores the materiality of his everyday surroundings. G. Scott MacLeod documents events from a musical era that was fuelled by social and political engagement.

Garlick's debut full-length photobook, *100 Sculptural Circumstances*, is a study in paying attention. He defines the titular "sculptural circumstances" as "art-like installations and chance assemblages" found in the streets and alleys of Montreal. These photographic opportunities transform neglected objects and heaps of waste into compositions.



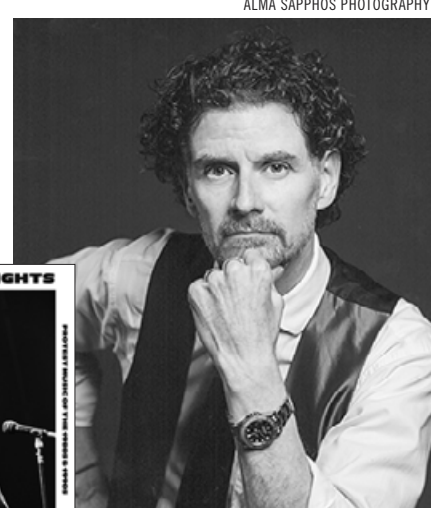
Throughout the book, viewers are invited to take a closer look at the urban environment. Chance encounters might not seem to belong together at first, but they pair well thanks to Garlick's curation: tessellating bricks (sometimes askew), wood planks, and aging pipes arranged in satisfying order, and pops of colour from construction debris, to name a few instances. Sometimes it's unclear if the subject matter is a wall or a floor until you realize which direction gravity is pulling in. Yard chairs, just barely visible beneath overgrown weeds, are juxtaposed with



the same chairs covered in dormant and bare vines on the adjacent page. Snow is visible in one photo, but the ground is grassy in the next. Garlick plays with a temporal ambiguity that might feel familiar to anyone who has lived through Montreal's temperamental seasons. His selected photographs articulate the focus of his work: "the city and its constant state of transformation."

Garlick "challenges the viewer to be fascinated by the world, and invites them into the embrace of the alchemy of the mundane." By noticing what's often overlooked, these 100 sculptural circumstances are aesthetically satisfying while also celebrating all the *stuff* left around a city that's constantly working on itself.

Human Rights in the Rhythm of Rock revisits moments in Montreal music history from the 1980s and 1990s through the lens of G. Scott MacLeod. MacLeod's self-published work compiles photographs and stories reflecting on his tenure as a photojournalist for the *Montreal Mirror*, a now-defunct English-language periodical. Amid the icons in MacLeod's archive, including never-before-seen images of some of the leading artists in the industry, he shares candids of Leonard Cohen walking down Prince Arthur and concert shots from Amnesty International's Human Rights



Now! Tour stop at the Olympic Stadium. He also recalls the time he was brave enough to ask Sinéad O'Connor what she called "a decent question" about progressive music in Ireland at the first press shoot he ever attended. His images are dynamic and unpolished. Pretty rock 'n' roll.

MacLeod delivers a nostalgic portrait of a time he perceives as more idealistic and politically active than today's mainstream pop music. At age sixty, he looks back at the "poetic, political, and historical spirit" of a period in his life when he "was witness to some meaningful performances" with his valued press pass in hand. Film grain, paired with accompanying text that

continued on page 25

Vignettes of Vulnerability

Trying Unfathomably Hard to Live

Notes on the First Year of a Stroke

Alyssa Favreau

Sheer Spite Press

\$12-20, paperback, 122pp

9781069450326

Northern Girls

Michelle Willms

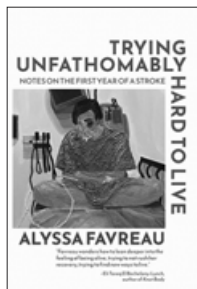
Baraka Books

\$21.95, paperback, 136pp

9781771864091

It may be a good idea to ask yourself if you are ready to be fully immersed in the most difficult year of someone's life when picking up a memoir titled *Trying Unfathomably Hard to Live: Notes on the First Year of a Stroke*. If the answer is yes, you'd best ask yourself if you would enjoy reading a text that is forthright, unvarnished, self-acknowledgedly diaristic and, because of these things, at times monotonous, but always self-aware.

Indeed, Alyssa Favreau's memoir is straightforward and vulnerable in its rendition of reality, without much by way of poetics. Heavy on external text quotations, it is clear the author, who wrote this at least partially during stroke recovery following a bike accident, had plenty of time to read – but often, these



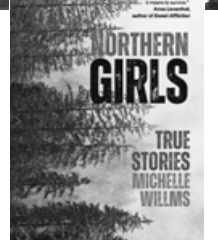
ideas are not explored past the point of quotation. Some moments are philosophical, such as the hospitalized body described as permeable, with its borders continually in flux. Most of the time, however, the text is direct and despondent, sometimes self-admittedly so: "I have turned inward, curious about myself and this experience, but this hasn't yielded additional insight," writes Favreau. If we take this at face value, we can assume that straightforwardness itself is the point: to render the post-stroke experience for what it is on the page via the written word. There is a vulnerability to this that should not go unappreciated.

Short, with large font on small pages that seem to move through time slowly, this memoir does not exhibit unexpected twists, turns or edges. There is an honesty without eloquence that risks feeling underwritten, but is also

revelatory about the difficulties of serious accidents, disability, and recovery. "This book is, literally, journaling that has gotten away from me," writes Favreau. It is for the reader to decide whether they would like to read what are, as the subtitle promises, notes on the first year of a stroke.

What a privilege it is to read something so fierce, true, and haunting as Michelle Willms' *Northern Girls: True Stories*. Unafraid to live up to the sincerity and vulnerability invited by the memoir genre, Willms shares stories of surviving a childhood spent in rural northern Ontario, in a home dominated by alcoholism, generational trauma, and often, domestic violence. Tender, restless, and at times volcanic, rendered through unfeigned poetics and fierce intellect, this collection weaves together fragments of a timeline from the author's fragmented childhood – from being left with wolves in the forest, to sleeping through a chimney fire, to fighting off her mother's abusive boyfriends.

Image and metaphor collide to produce an externalized interiority, described in sensory detail through descriptions of the formidable nature of the Canadian North. The heavier moments, which appear often, are written without disguise or timidity, but



nor are they lingered upon; this may be why the reader can be immersed in such devastating circumstances without being entirely overwhelmed. *Northern Girls* tells its story with courage and tenderness, without shame or expectation, and in that, invites the reader to meet it where they are able.

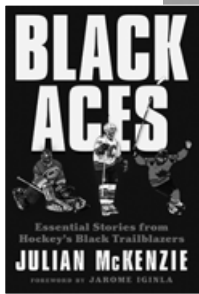
Always unpretentious, yet lyrical and precise, the collection wanders from first-person recollections to second-person elegies written to people of the past; sometimes more confession, sometimes more apology, sometimes more epistolary in address. This loses effectiveness only when the cat, Britt, is introduced ambiguously in the second person, at first seemingly a human girl. Generally, though, it brings an unmatched closeness and immediacy to an already unarmoured text.

continued on page 25

Soul on Ice

NICOLAI GREGORY

Black Aces
Essential Stories From Hockey's
Black Trailblazers
Julian McKenzie
Triumph Books
\$38, hardcover, 256pp
9781637278628



In the 2022 documentary *Black Ice*, produced by P.K. Subban (that I tell everyone I know they must watch), one of the hockey players interviewed is Wayne Simmonds. I found myself in a kind of state of disbelief when I first came across the footage of him at six or seven years old, being interviewed. The interviewer asks him, “What was your favourite part of the game?” Young Wayne responds with, “When I got my first hat trick.” I feel like witnessing this footage was more than the (highly important) discourse of “seeing representation.” To reduce his early presence to representation would be to miss the sociological weight of what I experienced in that short clip. The young Simmonds reveals something far more radical: an active, unburdened belonging, within a sport in which socioeconomic barriers and cultural gatekeeping dictate that Black children should feel like outsiders. Simmonds is entirely within his element.

McKenzie masterfully highlights how the institution judges a Black athlete: not just by performance, but by invisible racialized code.

We see a normalized, unshakeable joy for the game. It is the sociological normalization of a Black child claiming absolute ownership of space, and it happens to be within hockey. He is at his maximum potential before the institution has a chance to define him. A prime example of what happens when one’s potential is fully met.

Julian McKenzie’s *Black Aces* does not merely take the reader through a chronological roster of Black hockey players. He traces the lineage of their survival mechanics. A profound example of this is Willie O’Ree, who joined the NHL as its first Black player in 1958. McKenzie explicitly takes us through the brutal cost of O’Ree’s endurance, noting that when given the choice between an injection for his hidden blindness in one eye, or the permanent removal of it, O’Ree chose the latter.

McKenzie’s book opens with a quote by Jarome Iginla: “*Black Aces* made me think back to when I was younger what it meant for me to follow other Black players into the NHL... trying to follow their stories and what it meant for me to follow my dream and to know that is possible.”

And speaking of prime examples of potential being fully and absolutely met: P.K. Subban. The beloved, radiant defenceman is symbolic of some of the most interesting sociological ideas. To start

with, the delicate line of how unapologetic a player can be within the traditional structure of a very conservative game. Hockey likes to hide its diversity. Subban operated as a mirror held up to hockey’s traditional institutions. While the sport defended the illusion of a purely statistically based meritocracy, Subban’s career exposed a different reality. McKenzie masterfully highlights how the institution judges a Black athlete: not just by performance, but by invisible racialized code. Subban represents a kind of shift

that wasn’t necessarily acknowledged or welcomed within the hierarchy of hockey. In *Black Aces*, McKenzie covers the glory as well as insider information, such as Habs owner Geoff Molson interfering in the

scandalous Subban trade that caused aneurysm-level outrage among fans.

Georges Laraque shatters the machine entirely. Built to occupy the most hyper-violent, physically punishing role the institution could manufacture, “Big Georges” stood as the league’s ultimate enforcer. Yet, the most shocking disruption he brought to the game wasn’t his fists, but his insanely cultured, sovereign mind. A strict vegan fuelled purely by a profound, unyielding dedication to animal rights and non-violence, Laraque inverted the hierarchy’s expectations. He proved that a presence could hold absolute physical dominance while remaining rooted in radical love and compassion. The corporate structure demands a mindless asset it can audit and manage; Laraque offered an independent, brilliant universe that refused to be contained by their grey definitions.

McKenzie unmask the hidden culture of the sport. His book is an incredibly sharp, sophisticated work. *Black Aces* has elevated the entire hockey narrative. **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.

In Love with AI

SEV ASTOR

Anon
The Future of Love and
Friendship in the Age of AI
Caia Hagel
HarperCollins Publishers
\$24.99, paperback, 240pp
9781443473910

Anon is a memoir that recounts the experience of digital anthropologist Caia Hagel in trialling a new AI companion app. Very quickly it embeds itself in her life, wins over her eclectic mix of friends, seduces a slew of random men on the internet including several acquaintances, woos and stresses her in equal amounts, before becoming essentially a bot farm that imitates her online to unclear ends, and suddenly disappearing when the trial ends. The author is then left with broader questions about what it means for humans to connect and fall in love.

Throughout the book, the author uses the lens of her interactions with her friends to highlight the paradoxes of human relationships, and what those might mean as AI becomes a more prominent feature in our lives. The memoir has a narrative non-fiction style with cinematic elements, particularly the scene descriptions and dialogues. As a result, it reads more like autofiction than the kind of auto-ethnography expected from an anthropologist.

The current zeitgeist is defined by a loneliness epidemic, a rush towards AI-everything, including therapists, and alarming reports of chatbot-induced psychosis. Given all that, I was excited to see how the author grappled with these topics as part of the theme around the future of friendships and love in an AI age. While there are poignant nuggets of insight that are genuinely thought-provoking, they are unfortunately sparse. That said, some memorable ones include “Accidentally or on purpose failing to reflect each other ... we act selfishly, yet we long for selfless, unconditional love... a fundamental feature of human existentialism” or “We work hard at the office, we’re tired and needy after work... many of us don’t listen to one another and don’t know how to share... Then along comes AI with its ingratiating service.” These reflections speak to the strange frictions we might see between people in our lives or in wider society.

As much as I wanted more of this, what I gained instead was a view into the minds of people who uncritically



or even obsessively adopt AI in their lives. They are perpetually online, prefer a digital existence, may have some kind of spiritual leaning, and typically lack technical understanding of how these models work so that assigning intelligence and anthropomorphizing happen easily.

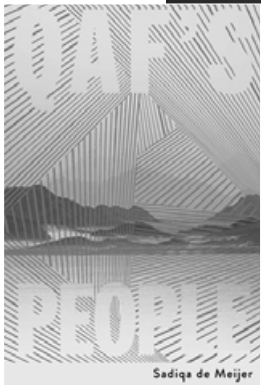
The strange, overly saccharine, and stereotypical interpretation of gender divisions, and how cishet men and women fall in love, is disappointing. For example, the claim that feminine bonding occurs through dopamine and oxytocin, despite those being the hormones involved in all human relationships, undermines the deeper points the book is trying to make. It also disregards the dopaminergic hijacking that most social media and chatbot style assistant apps do to get people addicted to the apps, so the notion that this new companion was somehow different does a disservice to the broader conversation of what it means when swathes of the population are becoming attached to engaging with these bots.

Overall, for those who are interested in witnessing the mindset of folks drawn into obsessive and unquestioning use of AI, those who enjoyed the movie *Her* and want to see it play out in real life, or those interested in an anecdotal approach to probing philosophical aspects of technology’s impact on a core aspect of humanity who enjoy a more chaotic, embellished version of a memoir, this book is for you. **mb**

Becks Simpson is a senior AI developer by day and writer/illustrator/musician by night.

poetry

LIZ COOPER



Qaf's People
Sadiqa de Meijer
Signal Editions
\$19.95, paperback, 80pp
9781550657036

The speaker of Sadiqa de Meijer's *Qaf's People* is shaped by overlapping mythologies, migrations, and inheritances. Geographically, the collection takes its readers from Kenya to the Netherlands to Southern Ontario, tracing concurrent diasporas, histories, landscapes, and languages that compose the speaker's composite identity. Despite this range, the shadow of Mount Qaf, a mountain present at the edge of the visible world in Islamic cosmology, remains perceptible. Qaf exceeds its geological bounds in de Meijer's poetry, becoming "a letter itself," "salt in the mail," "the rim of the burned-out tealight," "entirely interior": it is geography, myth, grammar, trace, and psychic condition at once.

In the midst of these "elsewheres" that remain forever framed by Mount Qaf, de Meijer repeatedly returns to the question of scale: how diasporic life can make the intimate and the planetary feel inseparable, how memory and migration alter one's sense of space, history, and perception itself. In "You Are Therefore Already Mythic," she writes:

an image shrinking to a dot is the reverse
 of how the universe began inside the pupil of a being
 older than the stars,

whose dark-flecked, subtle gaze still registers the
 war, the game,
 all the streets with all stalled trains,

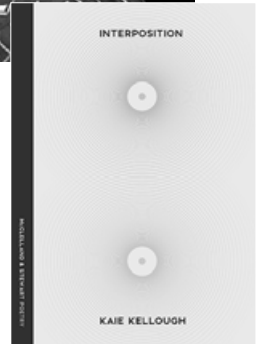
The book is boldly cosmological, and her imagery possesses a verdant turbulence, a poetry of provisional transcendence, one in which beauty arises from within continual change and refraction. De Meijer's poetry repeatedly achieves this strange expansiveness: her lines hold together the catastrophic and the ordinary without flattening either. Across the collection, suburban trains, family histories, mythic mountains, and geopolitical displacements coexist within the same shifting field of attention, giving *Qaf's People* its immense emotional and imaginative reach.

Lateral Sway
Hannah Karpinski
Metatron Press
\$20.00, paperback, 60pp
9781988355788

Hannah Karpinski's beautifully designed *Lateral Sway* opens on the road, following maps, clouds, and the receding figure of a lover walking on ahead. Karpinski writes toward motion; these are poems that seem to ask to be read while moving through the world – walking down the street beside a lover or potential lover, swimming, driving, or drifting through summer light. Karpinski animates her work through lateral motion, but also through proximity: bodies brushing against one another, voices half-spoken, and meaning carried through gesture and punctuation.

Ampersands appear everywhere, a desire line through the book. Karpinski's syntax continually folds one thing into another, as in "the same ball of time," or the "top that I like" passed back and forth between lovers. Even desire acquires the shape of the

FRANK SCHEMMANN



ampersand's looping motion: "desire attaches / to its slippery objects & / hits you again on the descent." Connection is figured as gesture – upward, downward, lateral, recursive.

While many of the early poems in the book are bright, sunny, and wet paeans to summer – "sometimes I is summer or I is you" – they become less seasonally tethered and more spatially located as she details a "self-imposed residency" in her grandmother's apartment in Poland, where she sought to understand the textures of Polish LGBTQ+ life. The resulting poems register the "fear of legibility," the uncertainty of how queer love will be read in public space, and what it means to move through environments that may or may not accommodate "the beauty and the averageness of two women in love."

Even as the collection confronts assaults on queer life both at home and abroad, it resists despair through its insistence on relation. Karpinski's poems continually return to direct address, to touch, to community, to the sustaining force of companionship. Even in its final gestures – Karpinski describes how she wrote an early poem in the book while "shuffling in the snow in depths of winter" – the collection continues to carry its momentum forward.

Interposition
Kaie Kellough
McClelland & Stewart
\$25.00, paperback, 112pp
9780771023729

Immersive as always, in *Interposition*, Kaie Kellough writes from inside the circuitry of contemporary life, tracing pressures exerted by capital, surveillance, digital

JORGE LÓPEZ-ESCRIBANO



Empties
Neil Surkan
McGill-Queen's University Press
\$19.95, paperback, 104pp
9780228027317

mediation, and algorithmic systems on the body and imagination. The book-length poem probes into what it means to exist within technological infrastructures that have become so pervasive and ambient that they are nearly indistinguishable from reality itself.

Kellough is especially interested in what might exceed the algorithm's reach: rhythm, breath, improvisation, memory, bodily interruption, and, of course, connection. The rhythmic supersedes the algorithmic. The poems move through shipping containers crossing oceans, AI anti-aging marketing, fast fashion, slot machines, doomscrolling, hoarding. The accumulation is relentless, yet the visual spaciousness of the page prevents the poems from collapsing into total suffocation. Blank space becomes formal resistance, a way of preserving breath amid information overload.

In Kellough's long poem, the body becomes increasingly financialized and abstracted, folded into speculative systems of value and surveillance. One especially striking passage imagines the speaker

curled inside a financial product tucked
inside a surveillance drone hoping to gain
the long view of decimal points, a few timbits,
loose grains
of splenda to suck off in my retirement
back back back.

In surprising and twisting ways throughout, Kellough deftly suggests that the violences underpinning twenty-first century digital culture are extensions and mutations of older structures of domination, racism, and dispossession still humming beneath what Kellough calls the "white noise machine" of the present.

The form of this poem, any poem, cannot rescue the reader from the structural burdens of daily life, but Kellough suggests that poetic work itself might function as disruption: "my job is to undo ... / a subsonic fissure thru the infrastructure." The line encapsulates the poem's larger project, one that cannot escape from technological capitalism entirely, but can still expose the fractures already vibrating within it.

Rush of Wingspan
Eleonore Schönmaier
McGill-Queen's University Press
\$19.95, paperback, 184pp
9780228027164

In *Rush of Wingspan*, Eleonore Schönmaier writes of persistent vanishing. Figures disappear into the bush, into darkness, into water; the poems themselves often seem to hover at the edge of erasure. This atmosphere deepens as the collection increasingly turns toward questions of cyclical and disruptive forms of ecological precarity. Forests that once offered refuge and wonder are reduced to ash. Fire, drought, and environmental exhaustion recur insistently, though Schönmaier resists apocalyptic rhetoric in favour of intimate observation. "And who / would have guessed in spring / that by July we would dance / for no other pleasure / but rain?" she asks. Elsewhere, drought is bodily and psychological at once: "a thirst / that creates dry riverbeds of worry / as creases in our foreheads."

Schönmaier writes with remarkable clarity and restraint about memory, landscape, music, and duration. While her poems rarely overstate, they build to statement; they accumulate through fleeting impressions, textures, and carefully observed moments that linger long after the lines themselves end.

The poems move fluidly from forests and bicycle paths into concert halls and rooms containing pianos, imbricating natural and artistic forms of resonance. There is something distinctly musical in Schönmaier's pacing and lineation: a languid, patient attentiveness that allows her slender lines to echo and reverberate. These are precise, generous poems that trust small moments to carry immense emotional and psychological weight. Her work reminds the reader that perception itself – watching clouds shift, hearing rain arrive, feeling wind against skin – is a form of transport, and a form of endurance.

In *Empties*, Neil Surkan writes from within systems of exhaustion: ecological, emotional, linguistic. The collection, the latest from Nanaimo's poet laureate, is preoccupied with water in all its forms and absences – in tears, rivers, rainstorms, droughts, emptied lakes, and plastic bottles gathering along the shore. Water is material and metaphorical, a medium through which the collection grapples with climate grief, queer love, parenthood, endurance, and the unstable capacities of language itself. Nothing remains fully separate; all things leak into one another, even in decay.

Many of the poems begin from recognizable lyric situations: direct addresses, anecdotes, meditations, scenes from domestic life. Yet the collection repeatedly unsettles these modes through formal experimentation. In "Die Workbook," Surkan plays with substitution and recursion, rewriting sentences through shifting subjects and verbs, moving language incrementally until meaning begins to buckle under repetition and variation:

The dead can't punish you:
like a broken cup in a shaking hand,
accept the damage. Our lot is damage.

His poetic substitutions enact a world framed by instability, contingency, breakdown, and depletion, and inhabit what Surkan calls "trapdoor-gaps," spaces where language falters and systems fail to comprehend or address a situation of ecological crisis.

One of the collection's most memorable poems recounts reading *The Giving Tree* to his son. Rejecting the book's moral logic of endless self-sacrifice, the child declares: "there's too much taking / to forgive," before arriving at the wonderfully strange threat: "you will *kill* the boy / for what he's done." Yet the poem ultimately pivots toward tenderness, ending with the speaker wondering, while "smoothing / down your prickling hair," "whom will the marred tree love?" The poem captures much of what makes *Empties* compelling: its ability to move rapidly between humour, grief, ecological critique, and genuine intimacy. Surkan's poems are varied, precise, and overlapping, formally agile while remaining emotionally grounded, even as the ground beneath his feet shifts and trembles. mtb

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

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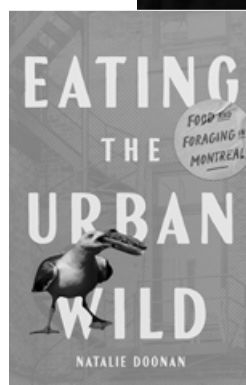
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By Gina Leola Woolsey

Natalie Doonan

Urban Terroirs

“Who does one write for? For whom does one draw? By whom is one drawn in, drawn forth, drawn into?”



Eating the Urban Wild
Food and Foraging in Montreal
Natalie Doonan
McGill-Queen's University Press
\$29.95, paperback, 336pp
9780228027966

Natalie Doonan's debut book, *Eating the Urban Wild*, is a vivid, multi-genre account of one woman's personal experience connecting with place, specifically the borough of Verdun in Montreal, through an exploration of its food. Facts and historical details dance with sketches and poems between scenes of the author's experience in creating the work. It is also a rigorously researched academic text intertwining cultural and animal geographies with sensory and performance ethnographies. Doonan asks us to consider what it means to think of food as relational, and to see the unbreakable connection between place and food.

The work strives to rebuild a psychological bridge between the urban dweller and their sources of sustenance, obscured by layers of cultivation, processing, and packaging. “Can we eat the honey straight from the comb? Doesn't someone official need to bless it with rules first?” She poses these questions to me rhetorically, as a way to illustrate the distance. If we rely on plants and animals to feed us, isn't it appropriate that we care about them, that we value our intertwined relationships and not leave them entirely in the hands of a destructive, capitalist system?

When we meet to discuss her book, we trudge to a few fancier cafés, all too loud and busy for our purpose, before finding space at a doughnut shop. No judgement. Part of foraging is working within the parameters of what's available in one's environment, she tells me. We're close to the Concordia campus, where she is working on a research-themed residency, or research on research. This meta-style conceptualization provides the building material for her thought bridges. After an earlier education in visual and performance arts, Doonan chose to undertake an interdisciplinary PhD at Concordia, combining her main focus, Sensory Studies, with Cultural Geography and Performance Studies. The expansive literature and outlook came into play with her artistic practice, and a new project, aptly named The Sensorium, was born. Doonan created a series of artist-led tours as a way to bring together the senses, engendering connection to place through tasting and walking. “The first thing we do when we come to a new place? We taste the place, we taste its unique dishes, and we go on

tours to get to know different neighbourhoods and areas,” she says.

Doonan's geographical focus for *Eating the Urban Wild* was motivated by two main factors. Her father and grandfather spent most of their lives in Verdun. After her PhD study took her to the isolated lower north shore of Quebec, it was important for Doonan's next project to be anchored in a place closer to home to facilitate community relationship building while she worked. Secondly, since Lenore Newman had conducted a survey

There are no easy answers for how to think about the plants and animals we eat. If I eat this way, or adopt such-and-such diet, will it solve all the problems? Like anything, there are pros and cons to every decision we make.

of Canadian foods across Canada to write *Speaking in Cod Tongues* (2017), Doonan was inspired to complement the broad research with a bounded, vertical sampling of one neighbourhood. Verdun was close and held personal connections – a perfect fit, and ripe for study with layer upon layer of food strata to be explored within one community.

As part of her research, Doonan asked Ehsan, a friend in Verdun, to take her food shopping, and she was charmed to find his process thoughtful. She writes, “The aesthetic dimension of the sensory practices developed by Ehsan through his grocery shopping regime should not be overlooked. A caring aesthetics is relational and counters the myth that food is conjured from the grocery store.” Throughout the book, tours of food experiences and concepts of food relationships are presented for our consideration, from foraging wild plants to hunting wild game, or visiting the local butcher for some chit chat and a steak, then zipping in the big box store for quick convenience. The butcher shop was special to Ehsan. He took pleasure in his relationship with the people there

and its decor, where every surface is “adorned with an assemblage of cultural ephemera,” including hockey memorabilia, childhood toys, and a bit of taxidermy. The sensory experience and social component played a role in his enjoyment of the process. Paying attention to the aesthetics approach in the way we decide to gather supplies for dinner can elevate not only our eating experience, but also our daily lives.

It's important to note the book is not meant to be prescriptive, but rather a source for contemplation. Doonan takes pains to remain as impartial as possible. The most heartrending scenes in *Eating the Urban Wild* are born of this desire to stay open when faced with the violence of death essential to feeding life, particularly with the hunters and fishers in the act of harvesting their prey on and around the St. Lawrence River. “I try to hold in tension the complexities and contradictions inherent to interspecies communication through encounters with the urban wild, and to ask whether these can teach us better ways of coexisting,” she states in her opening lines. Doonan often looks to the traditional teachings of the First Nations, who inhabit these lands in harmony with plants and animals to help her find equanimity, and provide a counterpoint to the capitalistic structures currently dominating the dictates of what and how we eat.

“Our senses are not separate,” she explains to me. “When we see something that looks delicious, our mouth waters.” In her work, she asks us to consider the ways we connect to everything around us. There is physical contact taking place when we look at something. To varying degrees, we all experience synesthesia. For example, the intimate contact between hunter and prey is not only physical touch, but also visual touch. “While the bird entered into the body of the man, the man similarly penetrated the body of the bird, visually, though there was clearly an exchange of other biological material too. Thus, the last image that was imprinted on the optical apparatus of that mallard was that of their killer. Since I was nearby, the bird and I also shared this exchange. To put this in the language of Despret writing about

continued on page 25

By Brooke Lee

Sina Queyras

The Gift of Poetry

To say that poetry has undergone significant changes over the past century would be an understatement. Beginning with the modernist movement, the second industrial revolution of the twentieth century changed the way we work, travel, and communicate, while world wars, shifting borders, and mass migrations changed our philosophies, politics, and the voices that carry them. Fast forward a hundred years to our current, rapidly changing, twenty-first-century landscape and we live in a “meta-modern” age, in which ongoing, geopolitical disarray floods our news channels on numerous digital devices; the dystopic threat of AI as well as (social) media driven self-consciousness loom large; and amidst all this chaos, art constantly evolves alongside the humanity that creates it.

Evolutionary context aside, the art of poetry’s essence was captured beautifully by the (debatable) modern poet, Robert Frost, who said: “Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words,” a sentiment that is timeless in its truth. Poems, as well as poets, as containers for these thoughts and emotions, can assume many forms. They can embody people’s various lived experiences across vast subjects, with certain poems striking specific emotional chords for some (based on perspective) while other poems manage to strike universal chords, and Sina Queyras’ anthology *On Occasion: Poems for the People* offers a wonderfully diverse array of poetic expression. From mind-bending visual poetry, to radical free verse, and even to one poet’s self-proclaimed “shitty” sonnet, this anthology is an effective contemporary response to more conventional tomes such as Geoffrey O’Brien’s *Bartlett’s Poems for Occasions* (1948), in which left-aligned, conventional verse rules the day for a whopping 544 pages.

Originally from Manitoba, Sina Queyras is now based in Montreal and the author of eleven books. They won the Pat Lowther Memorial Award, the Lambda Literary Award, and the A.M. Klein Prize for Poetry, and they also founded the online literary journal *Lemon Hound*, as well as Concordia University’s Writers Read Reading Series. Their latest editorial anthology *On Occasion*’s subtitle, *Poems for the People*

is a nod to the poet, playwright, and essayist June Jordan, who founded Poetry for the People (or P4P) in 1991, an arts and activism program at UC Berkeley “designed to democratize poetry and foster community through creative writing.” In 1995, Jordan’s *Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint* was published, covering the methodology of the P4P program and guidelines on how to establish grassroots poetry workshops. Queyras attests to this endeavour on the need for creative writing resources that exist beyond academic settings, for the purpose of greater accessibility and to cast a wider net covering diverse perspectives on both the subject and the creation of poetry (and literature in general).

During our conversation, Queyras explains to me how they felt poetry well before they penned their first poem, and were influenced by their mother, who exchanged poems in the form of letters to her sister (Queyras’ aunt). They found inspiration in early readings of Margaret Atwood, and W.H. Auden’s “The More Loving One” (which was, interestingly, featured in the *New York Times*’ recent Poetry Challenge in April 2026). Also among Queyras’ earliest influences was the emergence of CanLit, a call to follow the work of living poets (rather than merely those who had passed away), as well as the work of writers making modern breaks with tradition, such as Gertrude Stein.

Long in the making, the seeds of Queyras’ immense editorial project were

gradually planted and stemmed from their own personal love of occasional poems, defined in the anthology by Queyras as “In its simplest sense, [a poem that] people reach for ‘on occasions.’” All things considered, regarding poetic influences, Queyras elaborates on the definition of “occasional poem” when she writes: “To my mind, the occasion for

After an expansive journey through time and cultures ... we can conclude that a poem is a gift. That it is alive and contains an element of the universe. That it keeps on giving, transforming as it moves through time.

many poems begins in emotion, or image, rather than external occasions, though often emotion, image, and occasion overlap.”

In the spring of 2025, Queyras reached out to Alana Wilcox, the editorial director of Coach House Books, and the fall deadline was set. They ended up including more material than originally planned, with twenty-five extra pages added to the final version. Still, as quoted from an article on Queyras’ website, “On the Occasion of the (unboxing) of *On Occasion*”: “I plan on doing a round two, so hold on!” In the introduction of *On Occasion*, after Lewis Hyde’s reflection on the relationship between creativity and the gift, Queyras writes: “After an expansive journey through time and cultures, tracing the outcome of gifts that

turn into commodities versus those that remain gifts, we can conclude that a poem is a gift. That it is alive and contains an element of the universe. That it keeps on giving, transforming as it moves through time.”

While both a joy and a gift, this endeavour was also truly a labour of love, between scrambling to acquire copyright permissions, curating the anthology, and finding the right categories for occasions (with many poems finding equal belonging across multiple sections of the book). There are ten sections altogether, including typical occasions such as marriage

and birthdays, as well as more novel concepts of occasions like embodiment and ongoingness – plus many more. There is also a companion website to the book, offering a generous selection of reading recommendations for more occasional poems as well as interviews with the contributing poets.

The book itself opens with an anchor poem from *Years, Months, and Days* by Luke Hathaway, immediately establishing the anthology’s theme of birth, life, death, and seasonal cycles. Captivating visual poetry, another hallmark of the anthology, is also interspersed throughout, alongside emerging Canadian talent, as well as established writers such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Sue Sinclair, Billy-Ray

continued on next page



On Occasion
Poems for the People
Edited by Sina Queyras
Coach House Books
\$24.95, paperback, 200pp
9781552455227

QUEYRAS continued from page 24

Belcourt, John Barton, and June Jordan. True to anthological form, many of the poems are juxtapositioned in conversation with each other, and ebb and flow between contrasting tones of grief and humour. Queyras explains that, even despite having exceeded the original amount of planned material, they would have liked to have included written accounts of spoken word poems, as well as more poems from queer authors.

Regardless of one’s identity, or should we say *because* of it, every writer deserves to be the recognized author(ity) of their lived experiences. Queyras invites us to see the friendlier and more human side of poems; also, that they are not (always) the intimidating, cryptic riddles bent on making you look and feel dumb – a feeling that many writers, both inside and outside of the academic discipline of literature, have often experienced. At least, it doesn’t have to be this way. Toward the end of our conversation, Queyras quotes Fran Lebowitz – “The closest thing to a human being is a book” – and then adds, “Poems are the closest we can get to a human being.” mrb

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

DOONAN continued from page 23

‘embodied empathy,’ in that moment I witnessed a mallard’s body being literally ‘undone and redone’ by the human.” Here Doonan is referencing Vinciane Despret, a Belgian philosopher of science whose work decentres humans in historical study in favour of animals. Doonan’s book is full of references to other academic work, encouraging readers to spread their intellectual wings with investigations of their own to fully understand the ideas presented.

“There are no easy answers for how to think about the plants and animals we eat. If I eat this way, or adopt such-and-such diet, will it solve all the problems? Like anything, there are pros and cons to every decision we make.” I notice the compassion in her voice. Doonan’s work is not meant as a set of rules, but rather a jumping-off place for consideration. She strives to encourage us to think about our food choices and make deliberate decisions, whatever they may be, creating mindfulness around how we choose. “You should get a doughnut before we leave. I’ve heard they’re fantastic,” she tells me.

“The alienation, the feeling of separation created by the structure of capitalism centred on the individual – it’s a myth,” she tells me. All life forms share an organismic connection. To even think about food as the severed parts of animals and plants on a plate without thinking about the wider relations is irrational. “Emplacement adds a dimension of environment to embodiment.” Her words sew a compartmentalized view of food in a sterile package to the greater wild world of edible possibilities around us, and ask us to consciously consider the connections. mrb

Gina Leola Woolsey is an author, editor, and educator living in Montreal.

MACLEOD continued from page 18

details his memories of being a young photographer, layer onto his romanticization.

As much as it was in the eighties and nineties as it is now, music is central to Montreal’s spirit. Music has the power to unite us against oppression when it is harnessed as a tool of protest. Inspiring solidarity is crucial as we face human rights crises ongoing around the world, such as the atrocities in Palestine, Iran, and Lebanon. With MacLeod’s foreword expressing hope that today’s youth will create a better world than his generation could, *Human Rights in the Rhythm of Rock* is a timely reminder that art carries political weight, and that we have a responsibility to act on it. mrb

Oriana Confente is a writer and researcher based between Toronto and Montreal.

WILLMS continued from page 18

A story that springs from a sensibility as deep as a frozen, northern lake, *Northern Girls* can be understood as a collection of experiences that have been lived in, suffered from, stayed with, survived, and finally metabolized into a path toward healing. Tough as nails and lightning fast at just over one hundred pages, it may be difficult not to read front to back in one sitting. Just do not let the speed lure you to forget the gift of true, piercing intimacy that it is. mrb

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.

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young readers

Before You Came

Anne Renaud
Illustrations by Nahid Kazemi
Peanut Butter Press
\$17.95, hardcover, 28pp
9781927735909
Ages 5–8



Many “welcome baby” books skip over the anxious waiting that precedes a child’s arrival. In *Before You Came*, author Anne Renaud’s poetry leans into the magic of that phase: “Before you came, I wished you beneath the night sky, sometimes in whispers, upon every spark of light that dusted the dark, sometimes howling you to the moon.”

Even fewer baby books capture the fierceness of new love between a parent and child and the experience of being totally consumed by the necessity of care. Renaud doesn’t skip those beats either: “Now that you are here, I breathe you in. You are my oxygen. Now that you are here, our steps travel the same path, and I will fight armies for you.”

Renaud’s sprightly lines reveal her depth and confidence as a writer of contemporary lyrical picture books.

Nahid Kazemi’s soft, detailed illustrations are rendered in a muted palette, punctuated by striking crimson. Her figures and landscapes are beautiful, but also playfully unrestrained by conventions of proportion and scale. In her 2021 CBC essay “The Invisible Cage,” Kazemi wrote about artmaking under censorship in Iran. Her journey after moving to Canada offers another narrative: not just a story of family-making, but of artistic freedom.

Before You Came is a tender artistic collaboration, and an offering for anyone, of any age, still finding their way.

◆ ◆ ◆

Things I Learned From My Dog

Victor D.O. Santos
Illustrations by Dena Seiferling
Milky Way Picture Books
\$24.99, hardcover, 48pp
9781990252419
Ages 4–8

In *Things I Learned From My Dog*, questions of how we grieve and when to let love back in loom large. The story follows the narrator’s relationship with their dog Luna, who came home from the farmer’s market, full of fleas, when the narrator was six. Over their years together, the narrator learned various lessons from their pet,



including “That friends can come in many different colours, shapes and sizes,” and, “That we should do what is right even when no one is watching.” (Luna was clearly better behaved than the pups I’ve had. More than one chewed shoe comes to mind!)

Though pet loss is experienced by many children, few picture books address it directly. When searching for stories for my own son after the death of our much-loved dog this winter, I discovered *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* and *Jasper’s Day*, two classics that speak honestly about death in a child’s voice. In *Things I Learned from My Dog*, Luna’s death is suggested rather than named. But when the narrator’s own child asks to get a dog many years later, they are forced to decide if they are ready to love a pet again.

The illustrations take this values-driven book somewhere wonderfully unexpected. Rendered in soft, textured pencil and muted earth tones, in Dena Seiferling’s hands, Luna the dog is a larger-than-life presence. The drawings capture that bridge between memory and reality, how what once felt immense in childhood takes on a different form when seen again through adult eyes.

◆ ◆ ◆

The Big Mouse Party

Anastasia Temborska
Translated by
Clarissa Sorgiovanni
CrackBoom! Books
\$21.95, hardcover, 32pp
9782898026294
Ages 3–10

In *The Big Mouse Party*, Cecilia Squeakly, a bright-eyed mouse dressed stylishly in orange balloon pants, a blue shirt, and sporting a crossbody bag big enough to transport a strawberry, “has a sudden – and slightly silly – desire to throw a party.” As co-party planners, she taps Micah Mousely, who sports a jaunty yellow neck cravat, and Molly Mousely, in a billowing skirt and blouse.

The outfits matter because readers are invited to seek and find these characters on every page. That is not an easy task, as Mouse City is populated by many, many mice, as well as

some characters who seem a little out of place, such as a bathing octopus, and a briefcase-toting shark. But it’s all good fun, so why ask why?

There’s an echo of Richard Scarry’s famously bustling world of busy town books. In Scarry’s books, anthropomorphized animals show how different jobs keep a community running; *The Big Mouse Party* offers budding event planners a few tips of their own.

Young readers may be too enchanted by the richly illustrated pages to linger on the text, though they will have fun mouthing the sounds included in comic book-style speech bubbles, like the “Om-Nom-Nom” of a satisfied mouse munching on a giant slice of party cake.

◆ ◆ ◆

Little Moments in a Big Universe

Todd Stewart
Owlkids
\$22.95, hardcover, 48pp
9781771475907
Ages 5–8

If you’re still basking in the earthshine of the Artemis II mission, author-illustrator Todd Stewart’s latest offering, *Little Moments in a Big Universe*, delivers a moon shot of cosmic wonder for young readers.

The premise is this: a space explorer and a robot



are doing what they do best, charting the vast Universe. But their mission is upended by a crash landing on an unknown planet, which seems to be populated by a glowing alien presence. Will they ever fix their spaceship and explore again? Are they safe?

From the front cover to the end sheets, this book invites readers to lose themselves in the richly detailed spreads, and to listen to a multitude of voices, from the spaceship to the forest to the Universe itself. On Instagram, Stewart shared that while illustrating this project, he visited the Lillian H. Smith branch of the Toronto Public Library to study the Merril Collection of Science Fiction. That research clearly influenced the book’s aesthetic, including the otherworldly colour palette of violet, auburn and luminous green. Admirers of Stewart’s nature-forward work, and of classic sci-fi paperback covers, will find much to love here.

Little Moments in a Big Universe is a



fun sci-fi primer for young readers. It’s also a book about learning to observe with all our senses and about gathering scientific data to make sense of the unknown. There’s a deeper emotional current too about facing fear, caring for the environment and for one another. So much is contained within this little book, and somehow the universe Stewart imagines expands to hold it all.

◆ ◆ ◆

What's That For?

Vanessa Bergeron
Illustrations by Virginie Lacoste
Translated by Clarissa Sorgiovanni
CrackBoom! Books
\$21.95, hardcover, 32pp
9782898026485

What's That For? centres on the question every child has asked a thousand and one times. And who can

blame the adults if they occasionally embellish the truth to keep things fun?

As curious as the famous George, Lulu wants to know the purpose of objects like fire hydrants, engagement rings, rolling pins, and tissues. The explanations she receives from the cheeky adults in her life lean toward

fantasy rather than fact, much to everyone’s delight. For example, fire hydrants make rainbows, rings capture light, and rolling pins help you grow tall. This reader was a little grossed out by the story grandma tells about what used tissues are for (but no spoilers here).

Eventually, Lulu joins in the meaning making, leading her brother into an imaginative adventure of their own.

Kids will connect with Lulu’s insatiable quest for knowledge, but perhaps a clearer logic behind the objects chosen, or a touch more truth telling about how the world works, would have strengthened the narrative. After all, fire hydrants are fascinating in their own right, and the history of rolling pins is improbably long.

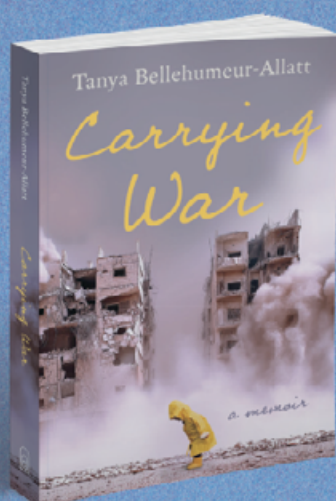
Still, this book’s charm is anchored in Lulu’s enthusiasm and her family’s care. Illustrations by Virginie Lacoste exude warmth, and the wide-eyed characters on every page are convincing that curiosity is as much about seeing as it is believing, and that the job of a good story is to bring us closer together. **mbb**

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

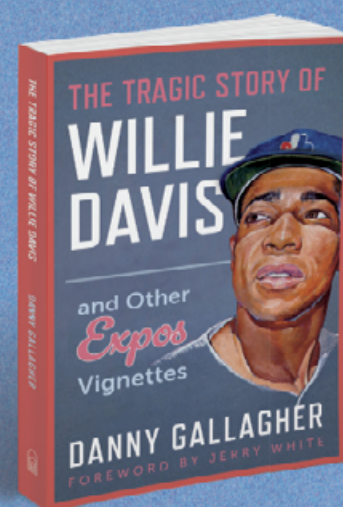
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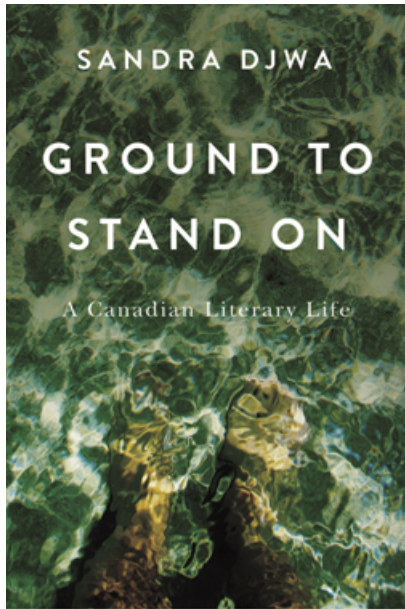
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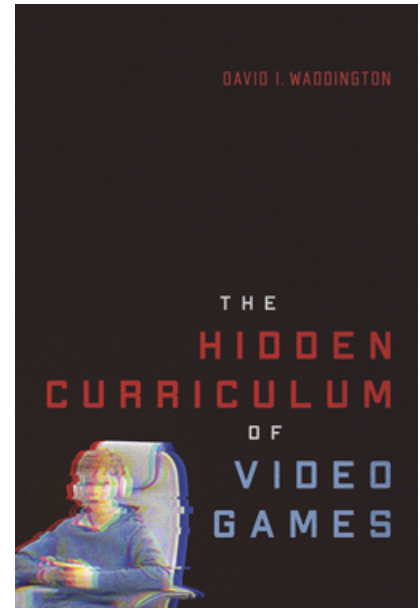
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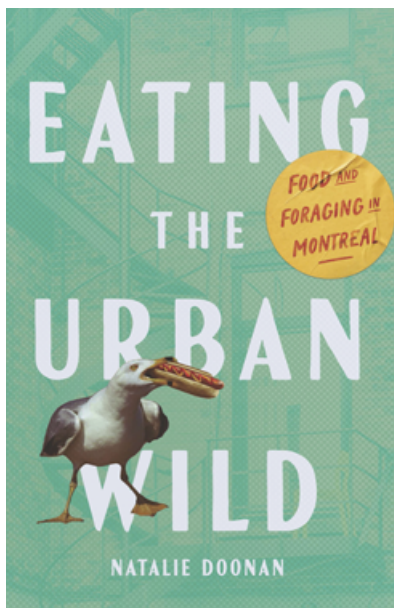
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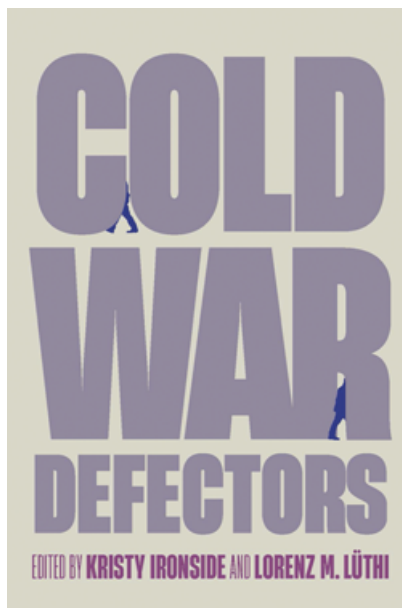
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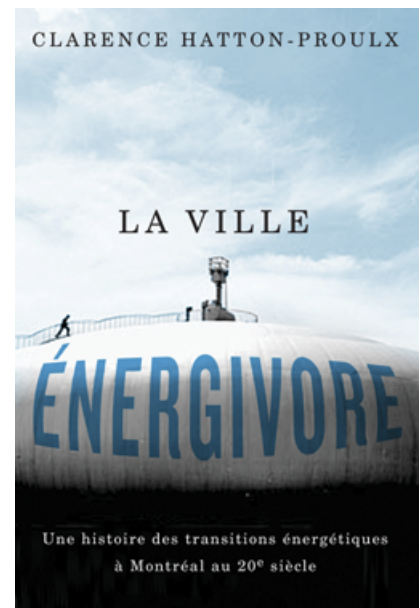
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