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Montreal Review of Books

FALL 2026



CATHERINE LEROUX

DEREK ARONHIE:NENS MONTOUR &
ELIN SANDBERG MILLER

KATHRYN JEZER-MORTON

SYRUS MARCUS WARE &
RA'ANAA YAMINAH EKUNDAYO



HOSTED BY LINDA MORRA

Monday, November 9, 2026
Reception 6:30 pm Award Ceremony 8:00 pm

Cabaret Lion d'Or
1676 Ontario St East, Montreal
Tickets: www.qwf.org/gala

PARAGRAPHE HUGH MACLENNAN PRIZE FOR FICTION

Edisson and Jeremiah MICHAEL CARIN (Guernica Editions)

No Wrong Seasons BRENDA HARTWELL (Inanna Publications)

The Longest Death KEVIN JAGERNAUTH (House of Anansi)

My Summer Vacation ZEENAT NAGREE (Véhicule Press)

Layaway Child CHANEL SUTHERLAND (House of Anansi)

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY FIRST BOOK PRIZE

Koh-i-Noor MICHAEL EDDY (Book*hug Press)

Opioids and Organs ARIZONA O'NEILL (Drawn & Quarterly)

Layaway Child CHANEL SUTHERLAND (House of Anansi)

JANET SAVAGE BLACHFORD PRIZE FOR CHILDREN'S & YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

Tom's Wild Ride ISABELLE ARSENAULT (Tundra Books)

The Mountain That Wouldn't Move SANDRA DUMAIS (Owlkids Books)

Mr. Kuroki's Garden ANNE RENAUD, illustrated by OHARA HALE (Crocodile Books)

Little Moments in a Big Universe TODD STEWART (Owlkids Books)

A. M. KLEIN PRIZE FOR POETRY

Missed Connections with Tall Girls GWEN AUBE (LittlePuss Press)

Interposition KAIE KELLOUGH (McClelland & Stewart)

My Great-Grandfather Danced Ballet MISHA SOLOMON (Brick Books)

MAVIS GALLANT PRIZE FOR NON-FICTION

Eating the Urban Wild: Food and Foraging in Montreal NATALIE DOONAN (McGill-Queen's University Press)

The Story of Your Life: How Social Media Shapes the Way We Experience Everything KATHRYN JEZER-MORTON (Random House Canada)

Other Endings: Organ Transplantation and the Burdens of Hope ANITA SLOMINSKA (McGill-Queen's University Press)

Before We Forget: How Remembering Will Get Us Through the Next 75 Years MARY SODERSTROM (Dundurn Press)

IAN FERRIER SPOKEN WORD PRIZE

BARBEDWIRE	EMMA BEKO
SILAS JAMES	B. LOVINGKIN
CAITLIN MURPHY	TRACEY STEER
ROMEL SYLNE	DEB VANSLET

PRIX DE TRADUCTION DE LA FONDATION COLE

Le trou dans le ciel VICKY BERNARD (Éditions du Noroît)
Letters in a Bruised Cosmos LIZ HOWARD (McLelland & Stewart)

Étude pour l'obéissance CATHERINE LEROUX (Alto)
Study for Obedience SARAH BERNSTEIN (Granta Books)

Quand tombent les aiguilles de pin : Une histoire de résistance Autochtone MARIE C SCHOLL-DIMANCHE (Éditions du Remue-ménage)
When the Pine Needles Fall: Indigenous Acts of Resistance KATSI'TSAKWAS ELLEN GABRIEL avec SEAN CARLETON (Between the Lines)

Arabes comme il faut OLIVIA TAPIERO (Éditions Triptyque)
The Good Arabs ELI TAREQ EL BECHELANY-LYNCH (Metonymy Press)

QWF PRIZE FOR PLAYWRITING

Children of Fire SHAHRZAD ARSHADI and ANNA CHATTERTON (Book*hug Press)

The Healing MARIE LEOFELI BARLIZO (Marie Barlizo)

Adventures GILLIAN CLARK (Imago Theatre/Keep Good Theatre Company)

La belle-mère / The Stepmother RACHEL MCCRUM and AMÉLIE PRÉVOST (Les éditions de l'Hexagone)

The Tao of the World JOVANNI SY (Stratford Festival)

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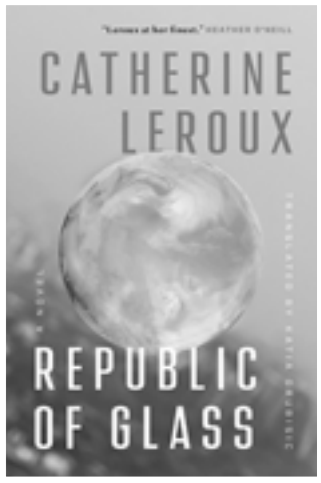


Layers of Possibility

BY H FELIX CHAU BRADLEY

PHOTO BY JUSTINE LATOUR

“I do believe writing is a self-fulfilling prophecy,” Catherine Leroux tells me, deep into our discussion of her latest novel, *Republic of Glass*, translated from French by Katia Grubisic. I’ve brought up the phrase because it appears as a lone statement, on a page by itself, in the heart of the book. It could be read as a warning or as an incantation for liberation. Leroux explains that she believes it to be true on multiple levels. On the micro level, she has personally experienced the eerie phenomenon of her own life mimicking the events she writes in her novels. “I don’t want to say that writing is magical,” she muses, “that we are conjuring things. But I’m open to the idea that maybe there are… premonitions.”



Republic of Glass
Catherine Leroux
Translated by Katia Grubisic
Scribner Canada
$32.99, hardcover, 272pp
9781668093313

On the macro level, Leroux notes, the stories that writers and news outlets tell about how people might behave during a crisis can dictate how people actually behave once such a crisis arrives. “We think that writing is a reflection of the world, but it goes both ways,” she says. “What we put into the world through our writing has an impact, also.” If writers are constantly telling stories about people responding violently and selfishly to disaster, then everyone will expect violence when a real disaster occurs, and react accordingly. On the other hand, she believes that if writers produce more narratives about people responding to catastrophic circumstances with solidarity, cooperation, and hope, it’s more likely that the public will react with more generosity and collaboration in real life. Her previous novel, *The Future* (*L’avenir*), winner of Canada Reads in 2024, is a notable example of her dedication to writing speculative stories that are not dystopian.

“We think that writing is a reflection of the world, but it goes both ways. What we put into the world through our writing has an impact, also.”

Authorial responsibility, and the possibilities of conjuration via the written word, are central preoccupations in *Republic of Glass*. Leroux’s fourth novel is a compelling tale of growing urban precarity, government hypocrisy, and slippery personal truths, and was born from Leroux’s own experiences of housing uncertainty in the early Covid-19 pandemic. “But what transformed that personal moment into something bigger that I could turn into a book was that it was generalized and exacerbated by the way the housing crisis was exploding,” she explains. Suddenly, Montreal, where she has spent her whole life, was no longer a city of “cheap apartments for everyone forever.” Her anger about this worsening phenomenon, and the pre-existing injustices it exacerbates, fuelled her writing process.

The story takes place in the near future, in which the Quebec government has begun locking up the ever-ballooning population of unhoused people in a new type of institution, with locations all over the province: the cheerfully named HAPPI (the Housing Assistance Program for Public Improvement). Of course, there is nothing happy about these places, which function similarly to the debtors’ prisons and workhouses of nineteenth-century Europe. Leroux chose the acronym to point to the Quebec government’s tendency to “hijack language” for its own purposes: “This is one of the things that power does, especially governments that are more on the right. They use language and they turn it into whatever they want.”

Sidonie, the novel’s protagonist, was once a successful journalist on the housing beat, but is now locked up in a HAPPI unit herself, having lost her comfortable apartment in a perfect storm of bad breakup and professional disaster. In its constrained and repressive atmosphere, she tries to maintain her sense of self by writing down her thoughts and experiences in a notebook. These entries form the main storyline of the novel. Or so it seems.

Republic of Glass is deeply concerned with the growing crackdowns on encampments in the 2020s, and the disastrous consequences of skyrocketing rents; at the same time, it is not a straightforward story of political repression and injustice, good vs. bad, oppressed vs. oppressors. Though the novel is clear in its stance against state repression and capitalist greed, Leroux’s ability to sidestep didacticism in favour of multilayered, non-prescriptive storytelling is a real strength. She deftly plays with the permeable boundaries of truth and fiction, which results in a novel that reads like a *mise en abyme* – each time we think we’ve arrived at the ultimate truth of the tale, that truth is recontextualized, and we must zoom in even closer to see its next iteration.

The story Sidonie tells about herself in her notebook is not necessarily the truth; nor are the things she tells the faceless Régine, an institutional representative who presses her for details about her life. Her own personal history, including her work as a journalist, is not as factual as it might at first seem. Even her descriptions of the HAPPI building – the way it’s laid out, how people get in and out, which plants do or do not grow in its courtyard – are both true and invented. Leroux adds further intrigue to the text by completely changing registers near the end of the book, and revealing an entirely new dimension to the novel. She tells me that this late epiphany in her writing process was paradoxically born from her initial desire to keep her personal experiences and the novel’s narrative strictly separate. When she eventually relaxed this fixed boundary, “the fictional story contaminated my personal life,” she says; yet at the same time, this decision “opened up more doors for thinking about housing and home and homelessness.”

As our conversation wraps up, Leroux and I discuss one more important layer of this rich text: the element of translation. She tells me that her first experiences reading her books in English freaked her out: the translated text “feels both like it’s yours and like it’s something completely different. It feels both familiar and unfamiliar.” She likens it to Freud’s concept of *unheimliche*: the unease and fear that arise when the familiar becomes strange. It’s a good way to describe the mood of *Republic of Glass*. However, over the years, she has gotten used to it, and even started to enjoy it; she learned to lean into the collaborative aspect of the experience, something that Grubisic emphasizes in her process. Nowadays, Leroux welcomes the new layers of possibility and truth that translation reveals. After all, she says, the book she writes is never the same as the book that lived inside her head in the first place.

Next up for Leroux is a trilogy, to be published by Alto. She can’t say too much about it yet, but she shares that it’s a love story that evolves over many decades in another world, one that is subjected to constant turbulence. Whether on another world or our own, turbulence and human attempts to navigate it are central in Leroux’s work. “That’s how it feels to be a person living in this time right now,” she says, of the many upheavals in *Republic of Glass*. “The ground shifts under our feet constantly, the rules of the game are constantly being redefined, the equilibrium is shifting and broken.” Her ongoing project is to recreate these conditions within a literary context.

We can only hope that writers like Leroux will continue to disrupt pessimistic, dystopian, defeatist ideas of a doomed future – and that readers will actively seek these stories out, and let themselves be shaped by them. Writing may be a self-fulfilling prophecy; our choices about what we read have far-reaching implications as well. mrb

H Felix Chau Bradley is the author of *Personal Attention Roleplay* (Metonymy Press). They are the fiction editor at *This Magazine* and the books columnist at *Xtra.* You can read their monthly newsletter on books and perfume at filletchaubradley.substack.com.

fiction

From Canada to Cuba, with Love

Missy Whynaught
Elizabeth Ball
Baraka Books
$24.95, paperback, 260pp
9781771864350

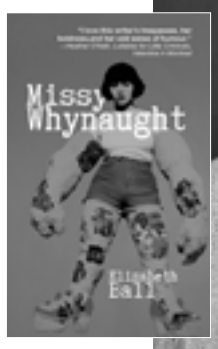
Elizabeth Ball's debut novel *Missy Whynaught* is a hilarious and heartbreaking exploration of a young girl's search for love and connection. The protagonist and narrator, Missy, is a New Brunswicker left to her own devices by Pup, her absentee but irresistibly charismatic father, and her gruff single mother. The coming-of-age novel is structured around vignette-like chapters depicting various moments throughout Missy's childhood, fledgling adolescence, and early adulthood. Several of the chapters were first published as short stories; notably, the novel's opening, "Dog Song," was longlisted for the 2026 CBC Short Story Prize. From laugh-out-loud depictions of her failed friendships and relationships to haunting scenes of violence, the throughline in all the chapters is Missy's attempt to mitigate her overwhelming sense of loneliness. Ball's prose skillfully balances the novel's dark themes with an irreverent sense of humour.

Missy Whynaught is, on the one hand, a Maritime novel set primarily between "Poverty Hill" (known today as Renforth), and Saint John, New Brunswick. But Cuba plays an important role, as well. The opening chapter begins with a flashforward to Pup's death in Cuba. This event serves as the frame narrative; in other words, it is the outer story that sets the stage for the rest of the novel. Readers learn that, after spending years travelling as an oil rigger, Pup eventually abandoned Missy's family and chose to live as an "expat" in Cuba. The Caribbean island-nation becomes fundamental to the plot's unfolding, and an important vector from which to examine the mythical place Cuba has occupied in the Canadian imagination.

This mythologization is on full display in the section of the novel when the eighteen-year-old Missy visits her father in his new home, which he treats as his own personal playground. Typifying this kind of Canadian expat, he boasts to Missy that, in Cuba, he "live[s] like a friggin' king for a few bucks a day!" By this point, Pup has an infant son with a Cuban sex worker less than half his age, but he has been cast out by her family for being an addict. Despite this, Pup is determined to give Missy the full "expat" experience by encouraging her to hire a sex worker and "have a fling of [her] own." Ever impressionable, Missy doesn't understand why she would suddenly have access to privilege she has never had before, but she is excited to find out what this newfound privilege brings her. In episodes such as these, Ball unabashedly exposes the uneven power relations at play between Canadians and Cubans as Missy realizes that there is more precarity in paradise than her father lets on.

STEPAHNE LAGRANGE





Characterization is another of the novel's notable strengths. Driven by a deep hunger for affection and utterly unable to spot red flags, Missy repeatedly finds herself in situations where she is being exploited. While she is frustratingly insecure, and at times oblivious, she is unquestionably endearing. Meanwhile, Pup is reckless and unstable, yet no matter how much damage he leaves in his wake, those around him cannot help but be drawn to his magnetism. Despite the novel's brevity, readers are introduced to over a dozen characters beyond the core cast. While in other novels this might be overwhelming, in Ball's hands, it is what makes *Missy Whynaught* such a compelling read. The personalities and quirks of characters with comical names, such as Dirk the Jerk, Feet Guy, and Big Red, are so fully realized that each character – no matter how minor – is memorable.

Missy Whynaught is an impressive debut that will enthrall readers with its insightful look at whiteness, class, and privilege in the Maritimes, and the complex relationship between Canada and the Caribbean. mRb

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.

Metaphysics of Madness

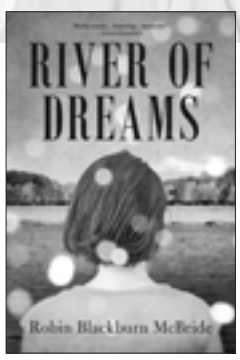
River of Dreams
Robin Blackburn McBride
Guernica Editions
$24.95, paperback, 250pp
9781778490309

From hormonal shifts to pregnancies, heartbreaks, and the tragedies that shape our lives, every woman has felt, or been accused of being, a little crazy sometimes. Author and poet Robin Blackburn McBride explores women's mental health in *River of Dreams*, a novel she describes as both metaphysical and historical fiction. The latter for its setting: Toronto in the early twentieth century, a time when women could be institutionalized when deemed hysterical. The former, because McBride speaks to the ghosts haunting these bouts of insanity – the lost children, the abusers, the dead parents.

McBride's protagonist is herself a haunted young woman. Since a near-death accident in her childhood, Avery Conlon has visions; she sees figures that reveal stories of the past, present, or possible future. This is how she guesses the mystery of her own tragedy, even though no one believes her. Avery grows up to be a nurse in a "hospital for the insane." There, her gift allows her to heal women previously discarded by society. She can do so because she believes them; their trauma hovers around them. Avery can name it and bury it.

LINDSEY GIBEAU





McBride's novel unfurls across a series of dream-like vignettes split in small chapters that can be quickly devoured. She evokes a gothic-noir ambiance, enhanced by the supernatural side of the story. Perhaps it's the time frame (the early 1920s), or the mention of men wearing fedoras, but I could imagine darkly lit streets framed by fog, a shadowy hospital basement, rustic country houses, and swanky downtown hotels. There's a version of this novel that could easily swerve into horror, with scenes featuring a clairvoyant in an old, dusty theatre, or a patient burying a doll. It all feels so macabre. But what McBride opts for is something far more gentle.

Somewhere between the tragic stories of Avery's patients, she meets a man, a doctor named Leif who works at the same hospital. Considering what's happening in parallel to this meet-cute, including stories of sexual abuse and self-harm, I couldn't help but feel dread at this masculine presence, like surely something very bad would happen to this circle of mutual female understanding if a man entered it. He is the weak point of the story for me. Leif brings light and love; he is a blank slate of acceptance for Avery's oddities. Much of their conversations revolve around her trying to push him away, emphasizing how weird she is; too weird for him, such a good man.

The rest of the novel centres on acceptance and the love of women listening to women and giving each other the space to be a little insane, especially when the world is pushing them to the brink. I enjoyed this sweet, feminist tale, pulled together from a darker history and carried by the author's delicate, lovely prose. It's romantic and hopeful, sometimes a tinge corny, but perhaps that's a nice thing to accept in your life and this mad world once in a while. Even if it sometimes involves a man. mRb

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

Myth Connections

A Hungry Fire
Élyssa Marcoux-Bissoondath
Cormorant Books
$24.95, paperback, 320pp
9781770868311

ANTOINE DUMONT





Anyone who's ever gotten the runaround while seeking help for chronic pain will likely relate to Élyssa Marcoux-Bissoondath's debut novel. Afflicted women, in particular, may fantasize about offering copies of the book to doctors, even while acknowledging that many are doing their best with limited resources. Considering the ongoing lack and narrow focus of female-specific medical research in Canada, *A Hungry Fire* merits applause for illuminating the implications of such insufficiencies.

Discouraged by how hard it is to get clear answers from her doctors, the novel's harrowed heroine, Dido, broods over gendered attitudes delaying medical advancements in common women's conditions: "Research is slow and has been for generations because funding is slow and has been for generations. And on the other side, silence and shame are rich," she muses.

Marcoux-Bissoondath cuts through this silence, vividly rendering Dido's plight with extreme pelvic pain. Traversing her late twenties with multiple conditions, including suspected endometriosis, the mixed-race protagonist advocates for her health while drawing inspiration from the dark-haired, mythical monarch whose name she shares, Queen Dido, fiery founder of Carthage.

Having moved from Quebec City to Toronto, Dido lives with her loyal, long-term partner, Juno. Professionally, she endures a punishing schedule, despite her crippling cramps, for a well-paying job that offers health benefits but douses the fire in her soul. A civil engineer with repressed artistic aspirations, she privately dreams of designing her own Carthage, and doggedly pursues a creative side project, rebuilding her dignity.

Interweaving the two Didos' stories, the author highlights her present-day heroine's resilience, addressing a serious subject with sparks of humour and glowing originality. "Chief among the nine Muses," Calliope, a quirky narrator, grabs our attention in the opening pages, reminding us that, in Virgil's epic poem, Queen Dido takes her own life. Abandoned by her lover Aeneas, she's consumed with vengeful rage and stabs herself with the sword he's gifted her upon a funeral pyre. Tension builds as modern-day Dido gets a different brand of brush-off, and the reader wonders: how will she reclaim her fire without ending in flames?

Unlike the Queen, modern Dido is blessed with a supportive man, but she meets betrayal in a medical setting. She's already deep into her "thirteen years of undiagnosable pain" when she's finally referred to dismissive Dr. Aeneas, an eminent gynaecologist who only echoes a by-now-all-too-familiar medical tune, where diagnostic protocols clearly favour patients who are trying and failing to get pregnant. With good reason, Dido mentally rejects the implication that women must be ready to create new life to be recognized as worthy of thriving in their own.

Alongside Juno, Dido counts her parents as valued protectors. While her father's voice is absent from dialogue, her mother, Hera (who's endured endometriosis), comes through clearly as a trusted confidante. Dido recalls being coached through her period pains as an eleven-year-old girl: "If you feel you can't cope, you can stay home. But how you decide to handle it now will determine how you live your life in the future, it isn't going to get better. You have to decide what kind of woman you're going to be." While this well-intentioned advice later helps Dido hold down a job, one considers how such stoicism can backfire, fanning the flames of shame while accommodating everyone but the sufferer.

An even fuller account of chronic pain might embody more of the personal sphere, fleshing out how Dido and her partner withstand its threats to intimacy – a challenge barely mentioned. Yet candid descriptions of medical experiences, painful procedures included, are ample, commendably countering the medical gaslighting that can occur with difficult-to-diagnose conditions.

As Marcoux-Bissoondath rightly spotlights health problems that continue to burden many women and affect their loved ones by extension, a burning question takes hold: How would the world benefit if more women were relieved of such pain and freed to meet their full potential? mrb

Kimberly Bourgeois writes and sings in Montreal. Visit kimberlybourgeois.com for news about her writing and music projects.

Western Impressions

Driving Crazy to the Front Door
Michael Foy
Linda Leith Publishing
$25.95, paperback, 234pp
9781773902043

ADDISON FOY





One of the greatest pleasures of literature is its ability to transport readers to a different time and place. In *Driving Crazy to the Front Door*, Michael Foy's debut collection of short stories, the reader takes a ride out west to Surrey, BC (the author's hometown), Vancouver, Tsawwassen, Vegas, Washington state, and a few unnamed, rural locations. Salty vapour fills the air on the page; there are screeching gulls, dusty quarries, tectonic debris in urban gardens, and developers snatching up the last farms that remain on the outskirts of the cities. Paradoxically, the only story not set out west, "Hit Submit," is the one that perhaps comes closest to capturing the mood of this collection, an awareness of our individual struggles succinctly conveyed through the protagonist's conclusion: "Maybe we all need a fucking break."

The fourteen stories, told in the first and third person, feature old and young adult narrators, adolescents, men, and women. Addiction (to alcohol, gambling, oxycodone, and other drugs) often steers the action, or gives certain context to untold backstories. In "Blowing Across the Top" we meet Tommy, a man disfigured in a drunk driving accident, who might have been a good-enough guy before becoming addicted to painkillers in the burn unit. Now he's sticking syringes in his vein before attending his daughter's flute recital and stealing comic books from her new stepdad. The language Foy employs is ordinary yet evocative, his description of the man as wearing jeans with "a rear pocket hanging off, like an opened ear of corn, revealing a dark patch of denim underneath" wholly recognizable. The reader rides the bus with Tommy, traversing the city via the King George to the church, and falling for a moment into the life he has lost.

In "Starting People," about a couple who adopt a neglected dog after losing their second baby, the temptation to swerve into a morality tale is avoided through humour and a subtle shift of focus. They find a farmhouse in appalling conditions where the smell of feces and urine "ploughs their noses," the gyprock is pocked with holes throughout, the mouldings are chewed, the walls are scratched. "We've had problems with squatters on our property," the breeder explains. "So I moved in… I lost my job in November and then this pain in my lower back started up. I'm on disability now. Do you guys want something? A cup of coffee?" They decline the coffee and go see the dogs in the garage, a cacophony of barking behind a metal door, too many together, the one they've been promised growing a golf-ball-sized cyst on its forehead. Sure, they call the SPCA after they leave, but they take the puppy anyway, and the woman who has suffered two miscarriages lifts it "like a warm pie onto her lap."

Foy teaches psychology at John Abbott College, so it's no surprise to find adolescents featuring prominently in his work, and teachers serving as protagonists. In "Ways to Hold a Gun," arguably the most layered story in the collection, a Vancouver teacher is lured to Las Vegas, where the American obsession with guns enters his life. "Mark hears gun talk everywhere. It puts him on edge, changes the way he drives. Never honk, gesture, or make eye contact with other drivers." But he is drawn to the strip, the sunshine, the no-limit hold 'em poker. Only when he must discipline the daughter of a backroom casino worker, a man known to bring his gun to parent-teacher meetings, does he realize that the stakes here are different. What happens next unfolds slowly, and the ending will surprise.

For Quebec readers, this collection offers a rare glimpse out west. Like the Fraser River, it winds through unfamiliar yet common territory. mrb

Pamela Hensley has published fiction and reviews in journals across Canada. She is the former Managing Editor of *yolk* and 2026 judge for Concordia's Creative Writing Fiction Prize. Her podcast *How I Wrote This* features conversations with authors from Montreal, Berlin, and Brooklyn.

The Political is Personal

Fragile Like a Bomb
Catherine Fred Lavarenne
Translated by Natalia Hero
QC Fiction / Baraka Books
$27.95, paperback, 370pp
9781771864312

The 2017 #MeToo movement shone a light on the pervasiveness of women's experiences of sexual harassment and sexual assault. While this eventually led to tightened workplace policies and even government legislation, even now we needn't look very far to see news stories about assaults not being prosecuted, victims not being believed. *Fragile Like a Bomb* takes a fresh look at the issue of abuse of power in intimate relationships by juxtaposing it against power dynamics in the government.

The novel's narrator, Stéphanie Goyer, is a midlist author who is recruited to represent a left-leaning party in the Quebec elections. Against all expectations, Stéphanie, and the entire party, score a resounding victory, reminiscent of the "orange wave" that swept the NDP to victory in Quebec in 2011. With a record number of women elected to govern, the win seems like a surge of hope for social change. But Stéphanie quickly finds herself overwhelmed by her new, fast-paced role. As she rushes from meeting to meeting, she is managed by her political staff and the party. Her actions, her stances, and her words are all scripted and predefined.

The story weaves between Stéphanie's job challenges, life with her husband and teenaged son, past memories, sexual fantasies, and her bond with her best friend, Marianne. Despite the first-person narration, it sometimes seems as though we're being shown Stéphanie's own life through an outsider's gaze: there is the supportive husband making pasta for a welcome-home dinner. But this rosy view of her life increasingly seems to clash with her innermost thoughts and her actions. As the gulf widens between her weeks at the legislature in Quebec City and her weeks at home in Montreal, Stéphanie becomes increasingly alienated from herself. She even visualizes two versions of herself, one who materializes at the door to her home and the other who waits patiently outside for her to go back to work.

While Stéphanie is struggling with her political and domestic roles, she also becomes personally impacted by #MeToo revelations. The accounts of sexual violence force Stéphanie to reexamine her relationships, past and present. She must come to terms with her own history and realign her view of herself. (Given the subject matter, readers should be aware that this book contains descriptions of sexual violence.)

LOÏS CRÉMIER





Both in her political work and in her personal life, Stéphanie must decide whether she will speak out and make waves. By making this parallel between political coercion and sexual violence, the novel serves as an indictment of party politics, rape culture, and systems that keep people complicit and silent in oppression.

One of the book's strengths is its portrayal of the cogwheels that make up provincial politics, as a hopeful new party falls into pre-established ruts. The author's descriptions of Stéphanie's political experiences take up a significant portion of the book, which can be a taxing read: too many meetings, too many instances of "have you read the brief yet?" Care was taken in the translation to convey the flavour of the French language; however, this sometimes leads to awkward passages in English, particularly in the dialogue.

Despite the seriousness of the subject matter, the story also captures the flavour of Montreal neighbourhood life and offers glimpses of its lively political and literary scenes. But perhaps the novel's brightest point is its description of varied connections between women, and especially of the deep and sustaining friendship between Stéphanie and Marianne. These bonds shimmer, a source of hope in the face of violence and repression. mrb

Josée Lafrenière is a Montreal writer, editor, and translator.

A Trial of Faith

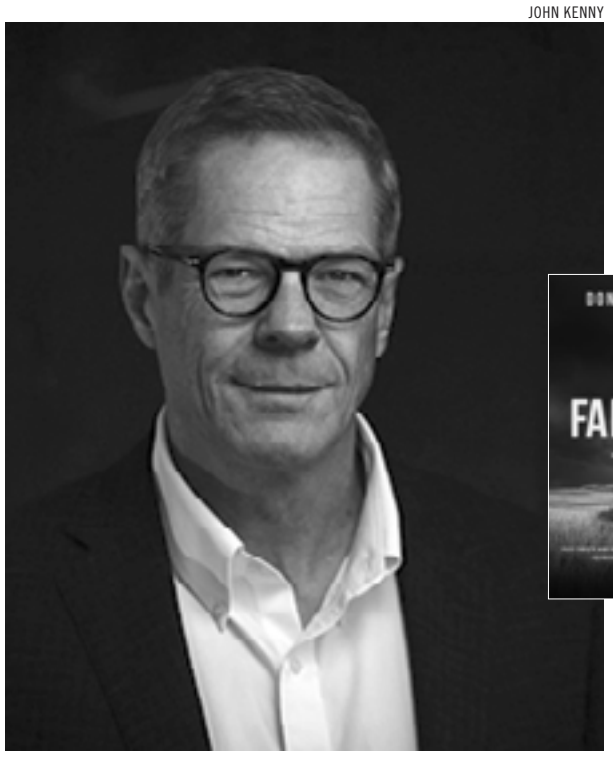
The Faithful
A Michael Shelter Mystery
Don Macdonald
Linda Leith Publishing
$26.95, paperback, 332pp
9781773901985

Don Macdonald's *The Faithful* is a classic detective novel that takes place in and around a very guarded, close-knit Hutterite community in the Prairies. Like the Amish and the Mennonites, the Hutterites are a branch of the Anabaptist movement who live in closed-off agricultural communities, or colonies, as they are called. So while being Canadian, the story has a touch of secretive foreignness.

The story opens with Jacob Waldner rushing off to an impending meeting in Winnipeg with his accountant. At this point, we know very little about him, other than the fact that he lives in an agricultural community outside of Winnipeg with his family, where he manages the community's accounts. Just as he is about to leave, Jacob sees a text on his phone and follows it up with a call. His brother Amos notices his excitement, and we get the feeling this is a particularly bad omen. Once in the city, Jacob settles into a luxurious Airbnb and not a page later, he's been violently murdered. That leaves us with over three hundred pages to meet the (many) characters involved and get a glimpse into their background stories.

Detective Sergeant Michael Shelter and his partner, Gabriel Traverse, are called in to investigate. Surprisingly, they learn that Jacob is a Hutterite from the Round Rock Colony, near the little town of Krefeld. The venue of the brutal murder, an opulent condo in the popular part of town, is completely out of character for someone like Jacob, who doesn't mix with those on the outside and is definitely not prone to life's little or big luxuries.

JOHN KENNY





The investigation starts by focusing on who was involved. Elias Stahl, an ex-Hutterite turned art gallery director, had arranged to meet Jacob at the condo, and we quickly come to understand that he was who Jacob was speaking to on the phone before leaving for the city that morning. In spite of the fact that both are married, the two men are in an intimate relationship. But the intrigue becomes way bigger than this illicit affair. Let's not forget, Jacob had gone into the city to meet the colony's accountant.

Macdonald is good at keeping the many strings of who's done what and when lined up with different hypotheses and suspects. At first, we are fed haphazard clues: there's the inheritance of a farm gone sideways, pitting two brothers against each other, one of whom has had quite a few run-ins with the law; then there's Jacob's sick grandmother from the Hutterite community and the nurse treating her, who has a special connection to Detective Shelter; and of course, Elias, Jacob's ex-Hutterite lover. Shelter investigates every clue, sometimes intentionally, sometimes through a twist of luck.

Gradually, several of the leads line up and a chain of events starts to take shape, but does it point in the right direction? We're never sure, as Shelter's personal life complicates things. His uncontrollable hallucinations and blackouts start to unnerve him. Gabriel also starts to wonder if the PTSD Shelter suffered from his previous case isn't seriously affecting his behaviour and reasoning. And then there are the arguments with Shelter's girlfriend, Penny, who wants to have a child with him: a difficult home life that leads Penny to move back in with her mother.

Against a backdrop of conflicting clues and mounting pressure, Shelter comes off as the lone cowboy, albeit travelling by car and not on a horse, as he goes back and forth between Winnipeg and Krefeld in search of the murderer. Although at times, the story lingers while the reader gets filled in with background facts and details, *The Faithful* is a good read and as far as detective fiction goes, the plot is solid. Setting the novel in the Prairies is a nice touch too, with its wide open space that seemingly conceals nothing. mrb

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

Resilience and Reconnection

Ninan
Tiohtiá:ke, Montreal
Michel Jean
Translated by Susan Ouriou
House of Anansi
$24.99, paperback, 176pp
9781487013653

Ninan. Tiohtiá:ke. Montreal. It is the simple but perfect title for Michel Jean's new novel, translated by Susan Ouriou, and published in English for the first time by House of Anansi.

"The stench. Always the same," the story begins.

The novel introduces readers to Élie Mestenapeo, a young Innu man pounding his alcoholic, abusive father's dead body with his fists, fuelled by the monster within. He soon finds himself in jail for ten years, convicted of murder.

In five short chapters, Élie goes from the Port-Cartier prison, to banishment from his Innu community of Nutashkuan on Quebec's North Shore, to the 1,300-kilometre trek along Route 138 to Montreal.

"To Élie Mestenapeo, who has never seen a big city before, Montreal is both intimidating and disappointing," Jean writes. "Intimidating because there is nothing familiar here. Everything is foreign to him. Disappointing because it is just an endless succession of anonymous buildings, dirty streets and indifferent faces."

Those faces, however, become a community of charming, interesting, tragic, and complex people, all on paths of their own full of difficulties, tragedies, trauma, and joy.

He meets Inuuk twin sisters, Mary and Tracy Nappatuk, struggling with crack and alcohol addiction, longing for children they have been separated from; a Nakota man handing out hot meals in Cabot Square; Mafia Doc, who refuses to abandon his tent despite the cold; and Geronimo, the Cree friend who takes Élie under his wing.

"Why is it such a reflex for Indigenous folk from different Nations to seek each other out when they get to Montreal?" Geronimo asks. "Because we grew up in a community and that's just the way it is."

Élie is among the 1 percent of Montreal's population: the unhoused. As is pointed out in the book's introduction, Indigenous people make up 10 percent of that population. Jean's book is, however, not only an exposition of the hardships of the unhoused, but also a celebration of their resilience. The characters' complex paths make them engaging travellers fighting addiction, pain and, in Élie's case, a rage monster waiting to take over and inflict pain on others.

The unhoused community helps Élie survive and understand his own pain, history, and trauma. It is through this community among the millions in Montreal that Élie discovers the paths that will lead him from despair to a type of success and support that has been absent for much of his life.

He also learns to trust – particularly Lisbeth, Mary's well-adjusted, brilliant, and successful daughter raised in foster homes away from her mother. "People trust him," writes Jean, "something he hadn't experienced since the death of his grandfather."

About halfway through the book, Élie leaves Montreal to return to the land and reconnect with a buried part of himself. Through this journey, he finds pieces of himself taken by his parents' destructive behaviour.

It is a book in three acts: Ninan (Montreal) or "the city," the land, and then the reconciliation between the two. In the end, the paths form a circle where healing and understanding are found. The humanity in Élie's parents – as much as they're flawed, violent, and responsible for damage to their son – is



understood. They are no more monstrous than he is. They did not, though, have the capacity, community, or resources to heal from the systemic trauma that ultimately crushed them.

Ninan: Tiohtá:ke, Montreal highlights Jean's skill as a storyteller and his talent as a journalist. He does not hide from realities, and he knows the city he investigated as a reporter. Ouriou's translation at long last introduces English readers to the diverse and colourful community far too often ignored alongside the issues that led them to Cabot Square, a tent village on Notre-Dame, a shelter, a friendship centre or a boiler room for warmth. mrb

JULIEN FAUGÈRE



Daniel J. Rowe is a published poet and award-winning journalist and photographer who works on CTV News Montreal's web team. His chapbooks can be found at Turret House and Cactus Press.

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Paths to Purpose

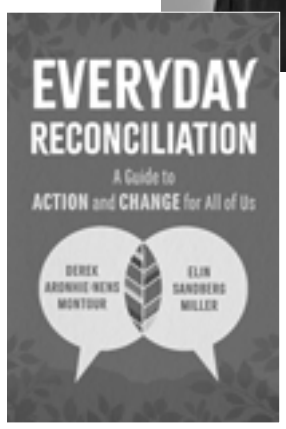
BRADY CROSS



ELIN SANDBERG MILLER



"Before embarking on any important piece of work, whether it is during a meeting or the creation of a document, many people believe that it is worthwhile to say a few words before all other words that come after." I'm quoting from the recently published *Everyday Reconciliation*, in which Kahnawa'kehró:non author Derek Aronhie:nens Montour asks us, in a passage containing his version of a traditional *Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen*, to imagine ourselves in connection with what's around us before embarking on anything important. It's perhaps the most beautiful part of the book, co-authored with Elin Sandberg Miller, which itself embarks on something important: asking what role ordinary people can play in rebuilding trust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada.



Everyday Reconciliation
A Guide to Action and Change for All of Us
Derek Aronhie:nens Montour and Elin Sandberg Miller
HarperCollins Publishers
$34.99, hardcover, 304pp
9781443475648

I meet the two authors for a coffee in Old Montreal: Montour, Indigenous from the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) Nation, and Miller, a Swedish immigrant and former diplomat who has worked in international law and human rights, among other things. Much like how they write – with callbacks and compliments to each others' interchanging essays – the two build off one another as they speak. "What are we reconciling? How are we supposed to live together in friendship if we don't know each other? When you don't know each other, that's when you are afraid, and you assume the worst," says Miller. Montour agrees and joins in to list some stereotypes about Indigenous people, then Miller continues, on reconciliation: "In Canada, it's been very much a government project. And we need that, but we also need to get to know each other as people."

A collection of thirteen essays, *Everyday Reconciliation* is the kind of book that is written to be understood, in plain-clothed English with direct references, and beginning with a co-written introduction. But Montour's first chapter starts dramatically, during his time in the Canadian military at the height of the 1990 Oka Crisis, when he remembers a fellow trooper saying: "I hope we go in and kill all them savages!"

Speaking from across the table, Montour recalls that year – at which time he served alongside Miller's future husband, federal Canadian Identity and Culture minister and former Indigenous Services Canada minister Marc Miller, who first introduced the co-authors. "I didn't share the comment at the time with anyone. It was only later on in reflection that I realized, am I in the right place right now to be here? Fellow soldiers are saying this about my people," he remembers. "It struck me very hard. So I shaped that first chapter around that experience, and just started writing."

In moments like these, *Everyday Reconciliation* feels memoir-like; but it is also, by its own description, a "guide." As Montour tells me, "It's really more like a Coles Notes kind of thing for non-Indigenous people to kind of take active part in."

Still, in many ways, it is a book about trauma: both Montour's and his community's. He writes about being sexually assaulted in Montreal, and tells me it's something that, after much deliberation, he decided to tell his son – who was not yet a teenager – before publication. He tells me about a powwow he attended this summer, where he saw his cousin and learned she was "in a void" with the book, because it surfaced her own memories of the Oka Crisis: "She's only at chapter two, because she has to keep putting it down; because it affects her. She was part of that, part of 1990. She was with her sister on the Mercier Bridge when it was stoned with all of the cars."

Trauma is the elephant in the room, Montour says, whether it's addressed or not: "We're feeling different parts of it – some feel a trunk and some feel a leg – it's slightly different for everybody, but it's still the same thing."

Both the breadth and depth inherent to the topic of reconciliation mean that this book in its entirety might be difficult to digest in one sitting. Be prepared to approach with intention: you will have to put in effort to meet *Everyday Reconciliation* where it's at, though the labour will be a fraction of what was put into it. In that vein, do not expect it to woo you at every moment with metaphor or narrative colour; it is unapologetically clear in its purpose, at times similar to a first-person, conversational instruction manual, with multi-clause explanations of historical artefacts that are not necessarily dense, but not entirely light reading either.

Montour, for whom the writing process was certainly not a light one, and who initially took a few weeks deciding if he wanted to share his story at all, hopes being vocal will help others do the same. Trauma is the elephant in the room, he says, whether it's addressed or not: "We're feeling different parts of it – some feel a trunk and some feel a leg – it's slightly different for everybody, but it's still the same thing."

In contrast, Miller seems to come from a different position, and perhaps it's only natural to question that; even she herself "found it difficult to know if she was even being honest with herself about her motivations" as she learned more about white saviourism, reads a co-written section of *Everyday Reconciliation*. I admit to her that I had the same question, and ask if she's encountered any skepticism. She says most of the suspicion has come from non-Indigenous folks, and tells me most of what she's heard from Indigenous people is that "non-Indigenous people need to take this on; we can't do it for you."

Montour says he also had questions: "I didn't want to be a token Indian, you know?" But the book seems to have really been formed out of conversations and the trust built from them. "Like we've been trying to say in the book, you start having a relationship by talking to somebody… and then that builds a connection."

Miller tells me she's written fiction before; Montour says he doesn't consider himself a writer. These are two people who are, in many ways, from opposite ends of the life experience spectrum; but at the same time, I wouldn't say there are real distinctions between their writerly voices, and, sitting across from me in Old Montreal, the connection they speak of is obvious. They put the book together writing late on evenings and weekends, and much of the work was passed between each other and their editor before finalization. "I would write furiously, I guess, just to get whatever's in here on the paper, on the computer screen," he says. "We kind of envisioned a much smaller book than what it turned out to be."

For a self-described "guide," the book is less prescriptive than some might assume; the authors are quick to talk about the process behind arriving at their answers, often reached after deliberation with others or each other. As someone who immigrated to Canada as an adult and knew little about Indigenous history despite diplomacy training, Miller's journey with reconciliation first started with conversations with Indigenous people. Even Montour says conversations with Miller led him to reflect further or differently: "We had some good conversations about land. I started reflecting on, what are the expectations of the Land Back movement? And how far do we go? And what does that look like? And what's realistic or not? It's simple to say, Land Back, give it all back. But it's a lot more complicated."

continued on page 25

Sea of Troubles

Whalefall
Ashe Lange (co-created with Riley Wilson and Zach Fraser)
InfiniPRESS
$20, paper, 92pp
9781777873585

Hamlet-911
Ann-Marie MacDonald
McGill-Queen's University Press
$19.95, paper, 150pp
9780228029441





In the spring of 2020, thousands of Montrealers descended on the Old Port stretch of the St. Lawrence to catch sight of an unexpected visitor, a young humpback whale which had somehow wandered 500 km from its habitat. This impromptu piece of public theatre, which ended in tragedy several days later, was the impetus for *Whalefall*, a poetic, meditative and advocacy-driven show about the collective majesty and tragedy of whales worldwide.

The published text, written by Ashe Lang in collaboration with fellow theatre creators Zach Fraser and Riley Wilson, can't do full justice to its multimedia production at La Chapelle Scènes Contemporaines last February, which utilised live music, projected imagery and, most prominently, several spectacular whale marionettes crafted from found objects and manipulated by the two performers.

But this handsomely mounted sea-blue edition, the latest from Infinithéâtre's in-house publisher, does make for an enjoyably brisk and informative read, heightened throughout by achingly elegiac passages, such as when a whale's corpse "sinks past creatures that look less like fish and more like drowned constellations, or musical instruments peeled inside out…"

Arranged in nineteen short chapters, the script is structurally reminiscent, in its modest way, of the freewheeling, kaleidoscopic dance of form and style Melville brought to *Moby Dick*. As with that urtext of whale literature, poetic prose goes head-to-head with cetological data (various activists, marine biologists, and experts are interviewed), epic catastrophe with absurdist comedy. One moment we're counting down a porpoise population headed for extinction, the next we're swimming with orcas who have spontaneously adopted a fashion for wearing dead salmon as hats.

It's also a coming-of-age story of sorts, as Lang touches on her own childhood obsession with whales, her naive delight in the seeming joy and friendliness of the captive animals at Marine World giving way to a recognition of the cruel realities of such places.



Conscious of her early misinterpretations, Lang avoids anthropomorphising her *dramatis personae* of whales, their social, cerebral, communicatory complexities marking them out almost as aliens amongst us (and aren't they, in a sense, extraterrestrials?).

An exception to this rule is the testimony of one of the interviewees, activist Captain Paul Watson who, having failed to sabotage a Soviet whale hunt, looked into the eye of a dying whale and read pity, not for itself but for humanity.

It seems a projection too far, yet there is a poetic truth to it; that great, lucid eye is a mirror in which we can read our own suicidal demise. A running theme of Lang's plain-spoken text is that if the whale falls, then so, ultimately, do we.

* * *

TRAVIS SILVERMAN



continued on page 25



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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 - Montreal-based writer



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Bassel Atallah
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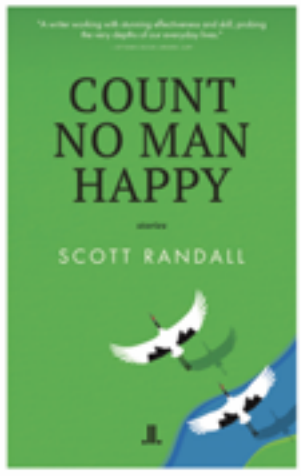
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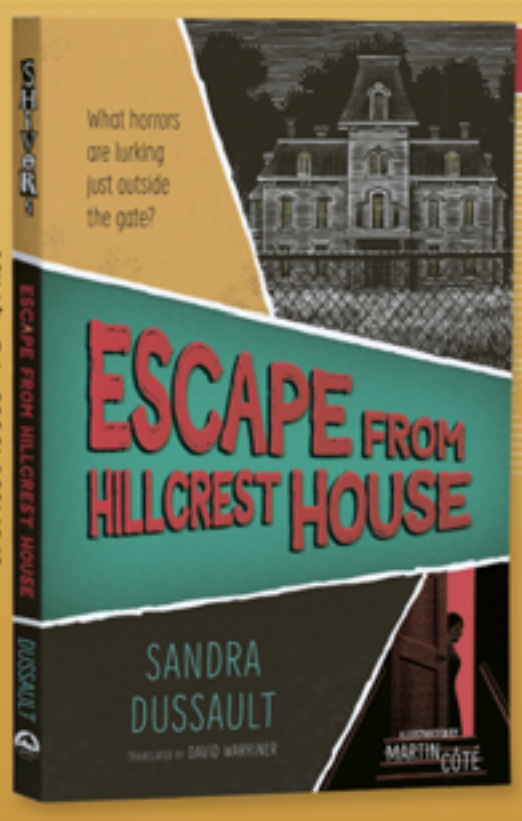
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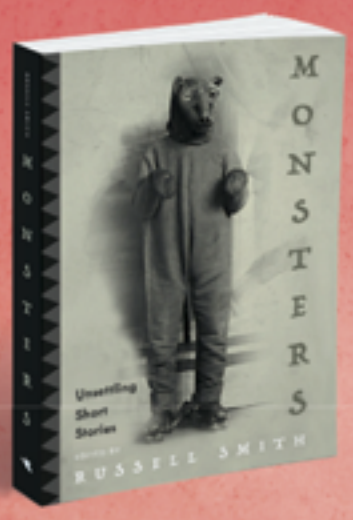


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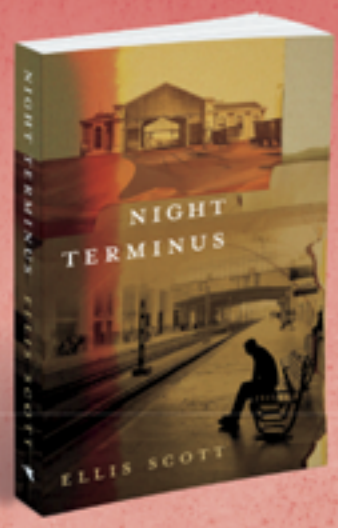
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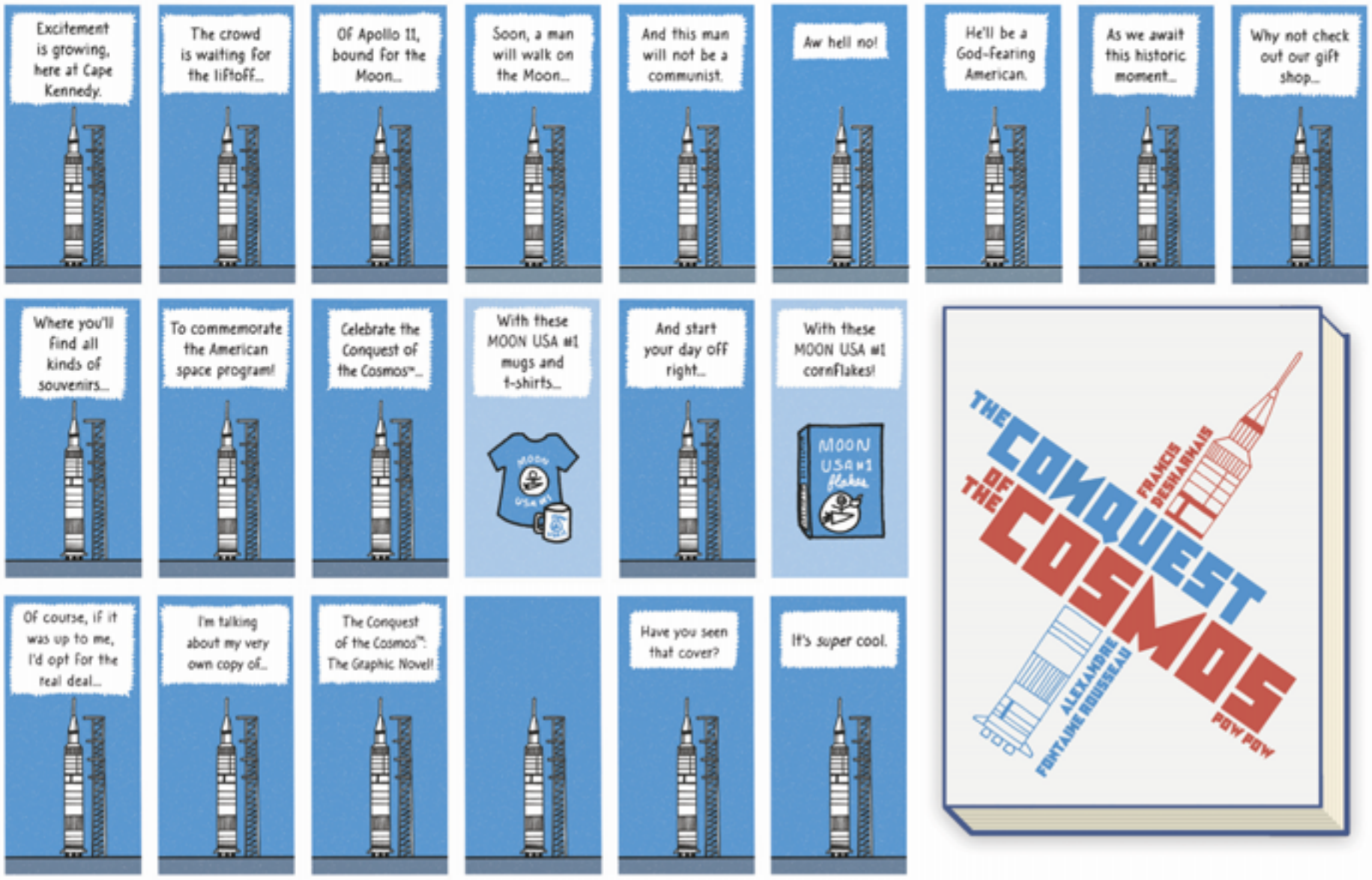


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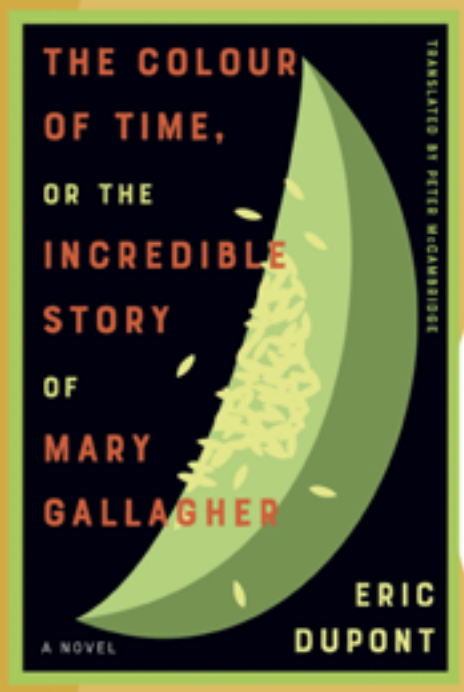
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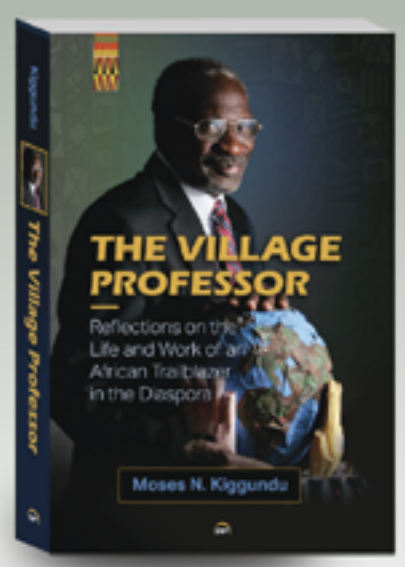
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graphic

Trading Places

The Case of David Zimmerman
Lucas and Arthur Harari
Translated by David Homel
Arsenal Pulp Press
$47.95, hardcover, 360pp
9781834050348

TOM HARARI



ARTHUR (L) AND LUCAS (R)



Few experiences could be more unsettling than becoming someone else overnight, but few narratives explore the premise as compellingly as *The Case of David Zimmerman*. On New Year's Day, thirty-four-year-old David awakens hungover with a fading memory of a one-night stand from the previous night's party, only to discover that he has become the woman he slept with. In their graphic novel, brothers Lucas Harari and award-winning filmmaker Arthur Harari craft a disorienting yet gripping psychological thriller about living in a body that is not your own while trying to unravel the circumstances behind this impossible transformation.

The story centres on David's confusion and desperation as he attempts to track down the woman he has become, Rachel Bluem. The Harari brothers resist the temptation to treat the premise as a gimmick, grounding David's reaction in a convincing mixture of shock, horror, and disbelief. They offer few answers as David, trapped in Rachel's body, exhausts every lead in his search for her. They also demonstrate how inhabiting a woman's body exposes him to forms of attention and behaviour that differ sharply from those he experienced as a man. This is the case when Rachel/David tracks down a man who claims that his sister underwent the same transformation, only to face a disturbing advance at an isolated suburban office tower where the man has driven her.

Artist Lucas Harari pens a gloomy atmosphere through his clear-line style and a palette of pinks and purples. Set in northeastern Paris in winter, the story unfolds beneath overcast skies that admit neither sunlight nor hope. The cinematic angles of panels evoke film noir, underscoring the novel's dark themes. Harari's meticulously rendered façades, cafés, and metro stations in Belleville, along with the deserted suburbs beyond central Paris, anchor the narrative in places rarely visited by tourists. The result is a Paris that feels at once familiar and uncanny.

The mystery deepens when David, now living as Rachel, is texted a photograph of his former body, clad in an ill-fitting puffer jacket. Convinced that the search is over, Rachel/David races to the scene, only to discover David's body is inhabited by Samia, a twenty-one-year-old woman whose story is strikingly similar to David's. After a chance encounter at a party and a night spent with a stranger, Samia awakens to find herself in David's body. Her only link to her former life is a puffer jacket.

Rachel/David and Samia (now inhabiting David's body), work together on their investigation into the transformation. However, David/Samia grows further despondent, unable to imagine abandoning her former life and resigned to a form that feels alien. Samia's suffering invites reflection on the extent to which identity is tied to physical appearance. More troubling still is the life attached to David's body: friends and family recognize him and expect certain behaviours that feel foreign to Samia. After all, identity is shaped not

continued on page 25

Spacing Out

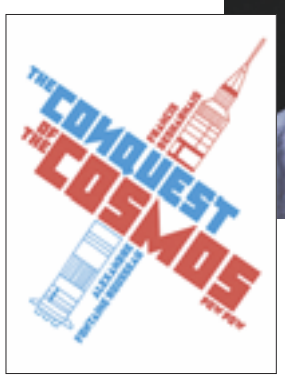
The Conquest of the Cosmos
Alexandre Fontaine Rousseau
Illustrated by Francis Desharnais
Translated by Pablo Strauss and Mary Thaler
Pow Pow Press
$34.95, hardcover, 204pp
9782925114611

LOUIS-PASCAL ROUSSEAU



JUSTINE LATOUR





The Conquest of the Cosmos is a nicely formatted, minimalist graphic novel, with big end leaves that can be used as bookmarks, as long as you don't mind folding up the cover too much. It's made up of little boxes, maybe ten or twenty per page, depending on the story being told, with two basic colours – shades of red and blue, along with the darkness of space. There are just the tiniest differences between the panels as we are taken from year to year in the last century, in writer Alexandre Fontaine Rousseau and illustrator Francis Desharnais's satirical take on the beginnings of the Space Race.

We begin in the late 1950s, with the launch of the Soviet space shuttle Sputnik. The name means "co-traveller," which makes sense, except that in this case it's a tiny tin can all alone up there. The same goes for poor little Laika, who was the first living being to be sent into orbit (aside from a few miscellaneous mice and other small creatures). She's just a dog, and the scientists haven't figured out a way of getting her back down to earth, so she just perishes up there. I don't even think she had a window to look out of, unlike what's shown in the book. As she puts it: "woof?"

The scientists who comment on the action are a row of men along the bottom of their respective panels. They have moustaches and beards, and little bald heads. They stand in front of a bank of screens, or look into little boxes. No women in the picture. The story is told in dialogue which is slightly hipster-sardonic. Lots of "mans" and "dudes."

Most people reading know the basic story of the Space Race. It was supposed to be a "final frontier," but when all is said and done, there's nothing to really do out there except float around, or play golf, or drop off the bottoms of ladders. Not that there's any air out there, or gravity. The Space Race is kind of a disappointment, really, after all of the science fiction tales, and the promises made on TV in the '60s and '70s when rocket launches first happened. Not to give away any spoilers, but the mood in this book fits just how humdrum space exploration has gotten. No aliens or ray guns out in the void. Just a bunch of rocks to pick up, and maybe an opportunity to burn up and perish on re-entry.

The present work captures that sort of mood very well. No big drama takes place. The reader is looking at just rows of boxes or dots, with people speaking to an unknown audience. Merely characters on a page. I guess sometimes we can all feel like that. You're indoors, looking at a tiny screen, while outside there's this whole world which can be a little overwhelming. At times it's difficult just trying to cross the street.

Congratulations to the creators of this book for echoing that feeling. Simple figures, hard angles, and very few variations in colour all come together to create a mood. It's great reading for a slow afternoon, or a time spent drinking coffee in some lonely shop, and watching people walk by. Certainly easier than listening to the news and hearing about wars and chaos and explosions. It is, almost, all just a joke. And with a few gentle smiles, and not too many words, this book manages to achieve its objective. mrb

Jack Ruttan is a freelance writer, illustrator, and comic artist, native of the fair land of Alberta, now comfortably living in Montreal.



Opioids & Organs

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A Literary and Political Autobiography.....



In *Overflow,* Montreal teacher, writer, publisher, and political activist Keith Henderson reminds readers there are encounters that shape the kind of men and women we become: those with our parents, our lovers, our country, as well as those with the books we read (in his case, Edith Wharton's novel *The Age of Innocence*) and with the ones we would write.

Henderson's memoir is his account of putting himself together again (and again), with a hint of guidance as to how we might do the same for ourselves, following life encounters that can make us, break us, and reframe us. The emotional turmoil of Wharton's lead characters in *The Age of Innocence* (memorably adapted to film by Martin Scorsese in 1993) reflect Henderson's own personal and public journey. A century and more separates his book from hers; what links them is their attempt to understand the nature of innocence and the precise moment it is lost to us.

Overflow is also an account of why Henderson has written the books he's written – novels, story collections, and essays – over the last forty years of committed literary and political productivity. This may be in the hopes of not being found wanting, or to be as inspiring to another writer as Edith Wharton and her life's work have been to him in gathering his thoughts.

Henderson claims to be choosing self-exile after all these years, increasingly retreating to his wife's Italian family home and into his own work. He claims to be done with Quebec, Canada, and all of their divisive "politricks." What keeps showing up in *Overflow* is an enduring love for his province and country of birth, and for the kind of literature and art *engagés* that may yet sustain both.



Keith Henderson

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LIVRES DC BOOKS

non-fiction

Dirty Work

Trash!
A Garbageman's Story
Simon Paré-Poupart
Translated by Pablo Strauss
Melville House Publishing
$24.99, paperback, 192pp
9781685892494

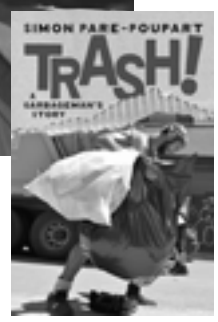
Like most cleaning, waste collection is nearly invisible when the system's working. At home, we hide our trash in neat cupboards and shiny-lidded bins, then ferry it to the curb once a week to be magicked away. As Simon Paré-Poupart puts it, garbage disposal is "an activity you'd rather not see, carried out by people you'd prefer to ignore, whose purpose is to make the countless things you no longer want to see disappear."

Trash! pulls back the curtain on urban waste while taking the reader on a brisk journey behind the garbage trucks of Montreal. A committed freegan, Paré-Poupart challenges our complacency about overconsumption and planned obsolescence as he digs into citydwellers' conflicted relationship with waste. "The garbageman is the Sisyphus of our consumer society," he writes, "a hapless labourer condemned to go from house to house picking up bags, swept along day after day in the never-ending flow of refuse we produce. And every day he is fated to resume this labour afresh, again and again, for all eternity." This critique sits beside some surprisingly joyful paeans to garbage collection and the people who do it, in a slim volume that flew off the shelves in its original French edition.

Trash! stands out in a sea of exposé/memoirs about working-class jobs because Paré-Poupart isn't a mere anthropologist or tourist in this world; he's run behind garbage trucks for over twenty years. He started throwing trash to pay for school, then stayed at it after finishing advanced degrees and finding white-collar work. While he brings a sociology-trained eye to his analysis, he doesn't see trash collection as a sideline to some other pursuit he takes more seriously: He just loves the job.

LAURIANNE DESJARDINS





He may be a proud member of the loose brotherhood of misfit sanitation workers, but he's also a bemused portraitist of their many eccentricities. Garbage route staffing is loosely contractual and vaguely mercenary, and *Trash!* is populated by a rough-and-tumble cast of men: "guys missing teeth, guys with tattoos, guys whose clothes looked like they came out of the garbage (and often did)." We meet garbage collectors who go to work on mushrooms, one who routinely gets arrested mid-shift, and a guy called Spandex, so named for the shorts he wears on his route, shirtless and in flip-flops.

Riding a truck's footrail in traffic while chucking fifty-gallon bags of waste into a compactor's maw is intensely athletic, the work so hard Paré-Poupart casts it as a form of self-violence. For him, the rush of that heroic physicality is part of the draw, and he even argues that the smell grows on you, eventually becoming beguiling. The downside? Oblivious, sometimes hostile citydwellers who make the job harder, which he caricatures in quick encounters brimming with class contempt.

Overall, his storytelling moves quickly and stays light, and Pablo Strauss's English translation retains a lyrical quality ("my vamping sowed seeds of doubt"). Even when Paré-Poupart pulls in academic insights – Bourdieu, Bataille, Deleuze, and Zola all pop up – the references are glancing and seldom inform a deeper analysis. *Trash!* can be a bit tough to connect with emotionally and reads more like a rant than an exposé, but it's an entertaining one. For most of its readers, who likely rely on garbage removal services yet think so little of them (literally and figuratively), it's Paré-Poupart's fierce pride in sanitation work and the people who do it that make this book sing, showing us a layer of our own lives that we mostly don't see or care to know too much about. mrb

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

Recipes for Disaster

Climate Change Cookery
Recipes and Resilience in England's Little Ice Age, 1550–1700
Madeline Bassnett
Concordia University Press
$29.95, paperback, 218pp
9781988111681

Madeline Bassnett's *Climate Change Cookery* is part historical study and part survival manual. Bassnett plunges into the archive of early modern English cookbooks, recipe manuscripts, and food science to examine how this historical knowledge can guide us in our own time of political and environmental instability.

On one hand, she positions the early modern period in Europe as a radical alternative to contemporary Western society. Without global supply chains and industrial agriculture, people of all classes had to work within their local context and with the environment to secure their means of subsistence. Simultaneously, she shows how this historical period holds up a mirror to our own contemporary problems. Bassnett explores how the Little Ice Age – a wave of global cooling that started during the fourteenth century and reached a peak between 1580 and 1710 – contributed to food insecurity, amplified the scarcities caused by war, and generally made people's daily lives unpredictable. She argues that examining the way that ordinary people survived the accelerating crisis of this period can guide our own responses to anthropogenic climate change.

It is difficult not to feel delight at the early modern recipes and food preparation practices as Bassnett describes a world of savoury preserves, breads made with various cultivated and wild grains, foraged herbal infusions, and pickled game meat. She recounts how women of this time kept manuscript books containing handwritten recipes that they had developed themselves or that had been passed down through their families and communities. These manuscripts are characterized as living documents which circulated between different people, who added to them not just new recipes but also "sermons, poems, letters, or sketches," making them monuments of both collective knowledge and the much forgotten subjectivity of people from the past.

RANDALL MARTIN





While some of the early modern recipes described in the book reflect our current digital recipe ecosystem that asks for strict measurements and a mix of ingredients at once baffling and highly specific ("Creamy Alfredo Gochujang Pasta"), Bassnett also shows the number of print and manuscript recipes that offer alternative methods, propose multiple options for ingredients, and require the cook to use their judgment and observation every step of the way. Although Bassnett describes a time when people were struggling with scarcity and precarity, it is difficult not to see this food system as something that was abundant, dynamic, and conducive to human agency.

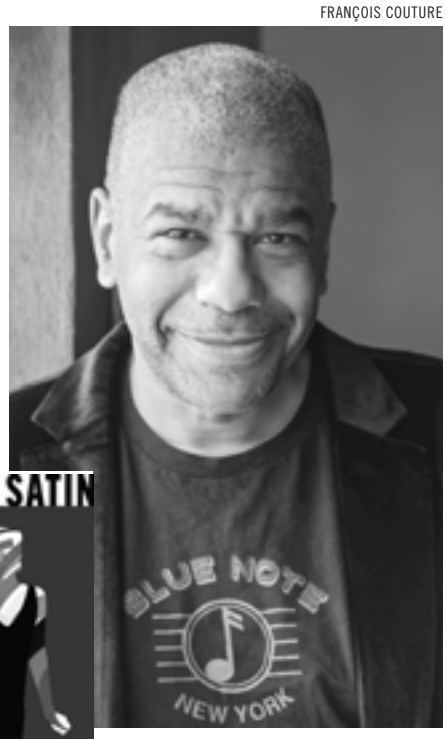
It's easy to get swept up in the whimsy, but this book is fundamentally about what it means to have a closer and more sustainable relationship to the natural world. The very first text that Bassnett explores is Hugh Plat's 1596 pamphlet *Sundrie New and Artificiall Remedies Against Famine,* which instructs its readers on how to cook with limited ingredients (there is one recipe that only requires bread, heat, and wine) and encourages them to seek out foraged alternatives to suddenly expensive goods like wheat. Plat's work was a direct response to an increasingly volatile natural climate and a reflection of a world in which "a majority of people worked on and with the land, encountering on-the-body weather while also negotiating seasonal patterns and changes as they attempted to raise animals and grow grain, vegetables, and herbs." Bassnett makes it clear that this was a time when even the wealthy could not insulate themselves from the weather, could not delay acting because they depended heavily on their environment and recognized this dependence.

Bassnett's ideas about reclaiming knowledge about food production resonate at a time when growing food insecurity coincides with record-breaking profits for national grocery chains and transnational polluters. We cannot have our means of subsistence held hostage by companies that privilege short-term profit over the well-being of our planet and its inhabitants. Although it is clear that learning how to grow, process, and preserve our food supplies can make communities more resilient and can restore our attachment to the land, there is an indignation I feel at having to prepare for an inhospitable world. While this task may be inevitable and important, I want to believe that the urgency of dealing with the present emergency should not be incompatible with demanding more for our world and for ourselves. mrb

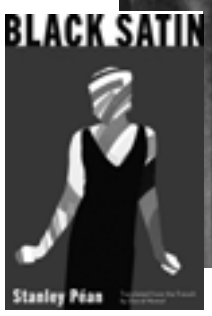
Aishwarya Singh is a writer and CEGEP teacher living in Montreal.

Resurfaced Voices

FRANÇOIS COUTURE



Black Satin
Stanley Péan
Translated by David Homel
Véhicule Press
$22.95, paperback, 200pp
9781550657081



Fifteen influential female musicians who have been "unfairly neglected, underestimated, and even cancelled by the leading historians of jazz – most of them men" take centre stage in Stanley Péan's *Black Satin*. The book mostly highlights Black musicians, with the exception of German pianist Jutta Hipp and the two musicians highlighted in the introduction, Fanny Mendelssohn and Maria Anna Mozart. The introduction details the backstory behind the title, as well as a brief history of these two talented women, and the legacies they were not permitted to pursue. This thoughtful opening encourages the reader to question who history claims to be the greatest, and who has been forced into the footnotes regardless of their talents and contributions.

Black Satin explores the lives and careers of musicians Ma Rainey, Lillian Hardin Armstrong, Valaida Snow, Hazel Scott, Mary Lou Williams, Bessie Smith, Dorothy Donegan, Dorothy Ashby, Ina Ray Hutton, Clora Larea Bryant, Melba Liston, Hipp, Shirley Scott, and Geri Allen. Péan brings the stories of these women to life without embellishing historical accuracy. In each essay, he delves into the upbringing and inspirations of each musician, as well as their discographies, important personal events, and deaths.

Péan honours the artists in chronological order, making note when their paths crossed or when they found inspiration in each other. He also details instances when these artists have received their deserved recognition, whether it be intravital or posthumous, and the significance that recognition can carry. For example, it is likely that many people's first introduction to Ma Rainey was through the 2020 Netflix film *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Péan discusses the importance of the film adaptation and outlines the connections between the film and the true historical account of her life in his essay "The Blues: The Hurt and the Balm."

Black Satin acknowledges each of these women not just as talented musicians, but also as the powerful leaders that they were. Despite encountering racism and sexism in various forms, all fifteen paved the way for future generations. Each essay provides the reader with a detailed understanding of the musician without being dense or monotonous. The author's love of music and appreciation for each musician is evident without being overzealous. The focal point remains steadfast on the musicians, with the author only sharing his personal stories and experiences in a few brief instances. Through each essay, Péan makes it abundantly clear that each of these musicians is just as deserving of acclaim as their male peers who are more often remembered.

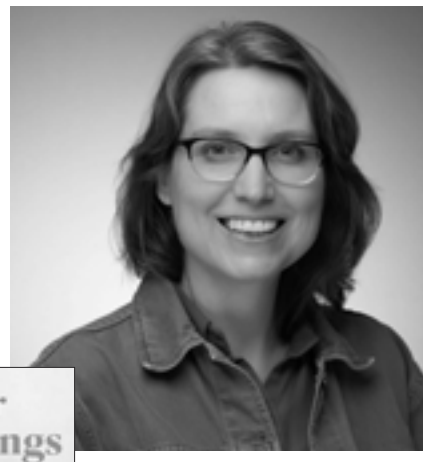
The book's final essay focuses on Harriet Tubman and "her role as a muse." I was skeptical about this essay as the closing piece, but found it to be an intentional and poignant ending, well suited for the book. This essay exemplifies how racism and misogyny have not ended, but simply evolved. It opens by detailing the 2017 U.S. administration's decision that Harriet Tubman would not be replacing Andrew Jackson on the twenty-dollar bill, as previously announced in 2016, due to "a lot more important issues to focus on." Despite this, the book's final remarks are not discouraging, but an inspiring account of the music and film that Harriet Tubman's story has inspired. Péan uses this final essay to remind the reader of the power of music in storytelling and preserving history.

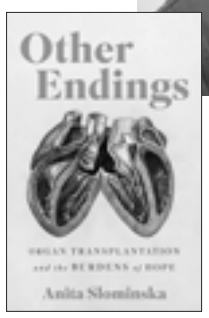
I grew up as one of few Black girls in a small city. I started violin as a small child, and would soon begin driving an hour into the city with my mother for orchestra practice on the weekend. All of this to say, I know the brief escape from limitations music can provide. Music has given me a home I've shared with both loved ones and strangers, including these remarkable women. The histories told in *Black Satin* serve as a powerful reminder – to all, but especially to those who have and continue to be marginalized: your dreams are worth pursuing, your talents are worthy of recognition, and your legacy is deserving of remembrance. mRb

Ani Melichar is a graduate student and researcher, passionate about pursuing her interests in music and writing.

Uncomfortable Realities

Other Endings
Organ Transplantation and the Burdens of Hope
Anita Slominska
McGill-Queen's University Press
$24.95, paperback, 180pp
9780228027195





Who are the people who die waiting? *Other Endings: Organ Transplantation and the Burdens of Hope* dissects this question – one the author, Anita Slominska, finds scribbled in the journal of her older sister, Shauna. From the opening pages, we know that Shauna is one of those who died waiting for a life-saving liver transplant. Yet at just twenty-nine, her death comes as a shock to her family and friends who had held on to hope that she would receive the call.

Slominska's account of her sister's illness and her suffering is raw, and her critiques of the assumptions that underpin transplant culture unflinching. She scrutinizes the complex risk assessments that govern liver allocation, detailing research that shows them to be imperfect predictors of mortality, and even worse, biased against female patients. Even when a liver becomes available, the odds of an organ's viability remain sobering.

Slominska's account of her sister's illness and her suffering is raw, and her critiques of the assumptions that underpin transplant culture unflinching.

The happily-ever-after transplant story told to everyone with a donor card doesn't make space, Slominska argues, for those who die waiting. She writes how "[o]ur knowledge and understanding of organ transplantation is limited to this 'imaginary' version that posits transplantation as a rebirth."

A question that lingers for me as a reader (and friend to a transplant recipient): While Slominska is not arguing against donation itself, how will transplant advocacy groups, and transplantees themselves, respond to a book that challenges the core messages – hope and celebration of the gift of life – on which public support for organ donation depends?

The book's most unsettling moments emerge from this tension. Recalling Shauna's physician's wish that somewhere someone might suffer a "gunshot wound to the head" so that a viable liver could become available, Slominska reminds readers of the uncomfortable reality that transplantation depends less on generosity than on tragedy and social inequity: "Optimal donors are young and often die violent deaths, and there is no escaping recognizing that this is connected to a system of economic and social injustice, racism, and also mental illness," she writes.

While grounded in critical theory and medical anthropology, *Other Endings* ultimately belongs to a tradition of mortality memoirs that includes Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*. In that book, Didion reflects on the sudden death of her husband, John Gregory Dunne, and her grief-clouded conviction that he might somehow return from the grave. But for those on the transplant wait list, Slominska argues that an unrealistic expectation of survival is encouraged, which can prolong suffering for patients and their loved ones: "Reasons to hope now seem like a subtle form of censorship. Hope can strangle lucidity even while we insisted that it was reasonable to be optimistic […] in retrospect, it seems fanatical," she reflects.

This is not simply a book about alternative endings, but about the stories we need to tell to live with loss. For Slominska, research contextualizes the trauma of her sister waiting in vain, while imagination offers a healing haven for lost hope: a fantasy of overturning the boardroom table where physicians conclude they have "no more tools, tricks, or magic" to save Shauna, and a posthumous dialogue with her sister about cat food and luck.

Other Endings pulls back the hospital bed curtain on the history, ethics, and limitations of organ transplantation but it doesn't lose sight of, and it gives voice to the people, like Shauna, who lived, waited, died, and above all were loved. mRb

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

States of Play

The Hidden Curriculum of Video Games
David I. Waddington
McGill-Queen's University Press
$34.95, paperback, 304pp
9780228027881

A glance at the cover of *The Hidden Curriculum of Video Games*, a solid black background with a child under an ominous digital filter in the corner, and one might be tempted to add David I. Waddington's book alongside other works decrying video games as an aggression-engendering machine designed to prey upon young, impressionable gamers. And although Waddington dedicates his first chapter to a cursory examination of the argument that video games cause violence (and debunks any inflammatory theses on the topic), he directs his focus to a more pressing question: If video games don't cause violence, in what ways do they affect us?

Drawing from American psychologist John Dewey, Waddington frames his critique of games through an educator's lens, interrogating specific games throughout for their potential to teach. To this point, Waddington explores the capacity for knowledge-based learning in the context of his own students playing *Fate of the World* – a game exploring national policies and their effect on climate change – in Chapter 6. But before *The Hidden Curriculum of Video Games* dives into games' potential to educate, Waddington focuses on troubling trends observable in mainstream games.

Chapter 4 breaks down an insidious but persistent set of political leanings in the design of mainstream games or AAA games – games produced by major publishers with large budgets. Inherent in these games, Waddington argues, is an exaggerated "techno-optimism," as well as "the omnipresence of rhetorical and structural elements of freedom" and "a generalized hostility to the state" – key components in his breakdown of a political ideology he introduces as "technolibertarianism." And the "techno" of technolibertarianism isn't limited to games that feature the speculative technology of the future; Waddington compares the technology in *Cyberpunk 2077* with fantastical elements in *Baldur's Gate 3* and pronounces them as functionally identical, the difference between a sci-fi and fantasy game "a stylistic one." Reinforced across genres in mainstream games, Waddington points out, is also a "cruel meritocracy": "The view here is that great players put in their time, and they reap the rewards they deserve. The corollary, of course, is that losers deserve the derision they get."



Wrapping up Chapter 4 on a sobering note, Waddington redirects his analysis from mainstream games to platforms built specifically with education in mind. Chapter 5 shifts to a product aimed towards early learners, an interactive application marketed as an early education game: *Paw Patrol Academy*. Waddington examines the behavioralist tactics implicit in the game's design, and although these tactics are practically ubiquitous in video games designed for an older audience, it's alarming to have a children's app laid out and to find its constituents resembling addictive psychological strategies associated with slot machines. The claim behind Waddington's dissection here is that the hidden curriculum of video games is not hypothetical by any means – individuals across demographics are already exposed to these hidden curricula daily.

But in underlining the hazards of video games, Waddington also takes care to explore how games can "offer up the possibility of growth, not just in terms of growth of propositional knowledge and competence, but growth in terms of the horizon of possibility through the aesthetic experiences they make possible." Waddington focuses on two personal examples of wildly different aesthetics, that of the game *Hypnospace Outlaw* and *The Longing*, examining the ways in which they succeed as works of art based on English film theorist Peter Wollen's seven strategies of counter-cinema outlined in Chapter 7. His optimism is nevertheless cautious, a sober argument that "what is to be gained, educationally, from aesthetic experiences in games is going to be difficult to pin down and highly variable."

Whether or not the nebulous benefits of games are worth navigating the landscape littered by technolibertarianist narratives is hard to say, but it may be necessary regardless, as "refusing to play the 'game' of hypermodernity is harder than it might seem." Video games aren't going anywhere, and *The Hidden Curriculum of Video Games* equips educators, artists, and players alike with a foundation with which to grapple with the ways that games change us and those around us. mrb

Ran Eastwood is a narrative designer based in Tiohtiá:ke/Montréal. They currently work in video games, but have also produced audio pieces, comics, and interactive fiction.

Small But Mighty

The Call
Rawi Hage
Diaphanes
$10, paper, 48pp
9783035807950

The Artisans
Madeleine Thien
Diaphanes
$10, paper, 48pp
9783035807943





Both Rawi Hage and Madeleine Thien are not exactly recognized for producing "small books," literally or figuratively. So, imagine my surprise when *The Call* and *The Artisans* – hand-sized, slim works penned respectively by Hage and Thien – landed on my desk. They strike me as the literary equivalent of the "Tiny Desk Concerts," featuring international musicians who perform live, stripped-down but remarkable gigs in close quarters at NPR Music's head office in Washington D.C. Compact and pithy, these books are part of a series called "Objects Talk Back," an initiative dating back to 2021 and published by Diaphanes, which annually invites two writers to select an object displayed in the Humboldt Forum, Berlin, or in the museum's collections and then to riff off the object in personal and imaginative ways.

Before I evaluate what Thien and Hage have accomplished, allow me to say that this series is itself a gem. Conceptualized and curated by writer Priya Basil in conjunction with the Stiftung Humboldt Forum in Berliner Schloss, it is meant to evoke new questions, offer fresh perspectives, and develop deeper understanding about our past. It is thoughtfully and critically engaged in its approach. Invoking the literary scholar Saidiya Hartman's notion of "critical fabulation" – that is, the melding of history, theory, and fiction – Basil extrapolates further, developing the idea of "fabulography," as an "invitation to work creatively with-from-through gaps, facts, and imagination to expand the narrative space around an object." She invites writers to participate in fabulography, that is, "digging deep" to mine details that may be painful but that also honour elements of our past.

As it happens, digging deep is one of both Thien and Hage's many gifts. Thien's *The Artisans* is a finely crafted short story in response to a mural fragment depicting three Uyghur princes, who contributed to the construction of a sanctuary in the Bezeklik Thousand Buddha Caves along the Northern Silk Road (outside the city of Turfan, in the present-day Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China). The mural fragment, formally referred to as Bezeklik Cave 20, was removed by Albert von Le Coq and brought to the Berlin museum following the Second German Turfan Expedition (1904–5); it was all but destroyed by the Allied bombings. Neither the colonial imperative, nor its relationship to the current political moment are lost on Thien. Her story, set around the eleventh century, during the years of the Uyghur Kingdom of Kocho, is in part about power dynamics but also about spiritual enlightenment. It is told from the perspective of an artist, a judicious choice: the artist's view, measured against that of the prince, reminds us of the former's enduring vision, and of the importance of art and artists.

What fascinates me, however, is the way that reading Hage's own work, *The Call,* which responds to a fragment of a Manichaean text written in Uighur and Old Turkic, adds further depth and resonance to Thien's piece (not that it needed any), while standing alone as a provocative consideration of the contemporary moment via polarising belief systems. Using the latter as a lens to read the drive of contemporary capitalism, he suggests that archival objects may be seen as a secular form of iconoclasm: carefully preserved but uprooted from their "home" or country of origin, they are hidden from view in museums, like many tangled histories. They are "buried caves" waiting to be "excavated and revealed."

It is impossible, he adds, to display everything in view of how much Europe has amassed – often through exploitation – and so he calls for an "autonomous Republic of Objects," whereby museums throughout the world would be transformed into places of refuge under the care of an international body of librarians and grant egalitarian public access. Whether this is possible isn't his point – it is the dream of striving and the promise of return, the very thing that artists, like those represented in Thien's story, offer us. mrb

Linda Morra's book *Moving Archives* won the Gabrielle Roy Prize in English in 2021; her podcast, *Getting Lit with Linda*, supported by a Canada Council Grant, won a Women Podcasters Award in the category of Arts & Books (2026) and in Education (2024), and an Annual Canadian Podcast Award in the Outstanding Education Series (2022).

By Malcolm Fraser

Kathryn Jezer-Morton
Bad Influence



CAROLINE DESILETS

The Story of Your Life
How Social Media Shapes the Way We Experience Everything
Kathryn Jezer-Morton
Penguin RandomHouse
$38, hardcover, 272pp
9781039012196

"I love social media," begins Katherine Jezer-Morton's *The Story of Your Life* – a bold admission in 2026, at a time when many of us use social platforms grudgingly if at all. The picture she paints of social media's role in everyday life is somewhat less rosy. The local writer and Dawson professor is as aware as anyone of the bigger-picture societal ills brought on by our Silicon Valley overlords. But her book addresses a more subtle, pernicious influence: the way our personal behaviour is affected by the hustle culture within the infinite scroll.

Born in Montreal, dual citizen Jezer-Morton spent her childhood bouncing between here and the Vermont commune where her father lived. After spending some time in New Orleans, she returned to her Montreal roots in 2009. As we sip coffee in a Mile End café, she shares some of her insights on how our online lives have shifted in ways we might take for granted, or not even notice.

The Story of Your Life arose from her PhD in sociology at Concordia, which was about the rise of online "mom-fluencers" who make their living dispensing maternal advice while hawking sponsored products. "I assumed I was going to be writing a book about that," she recalls. "By the time I finished my PhD, a) somebody else had already written that book," she laughs (that'd be Sara Petersen's 2023 *Mom-fluenced*). "And b) I was like, you know what? I'm ready to start thinking of another angle on this."

I think social media is quite gendered, it's reinforcing gender norms in a lot of ways.

What she found was that the world she'd studied had seeped into the posting habits of non-professionals: ordinary people were using the verbal and visual language of influencers – and, she observes, "seemingly without even really realizing that they're doing it."

In order to study this phenomenon in depth, Jezer-Morton had to step outside her circle of genteel aging hipsters with all the right opinions (my words, not hers), and talk to social media users in pockets of suburban Middle America. "Most of my friends here don't use social media, hardly at all," she says. "And when I was trying to describe my project to my dearest friends, they were like 'Cool. Yeah, I have no idea what you're talking about and I don't care.' It's just not something they could relate to. But if I spoke to rooms full of American suburban moms or college kids, they were experts on this."

I recognized many of the online behaviours Jezer-Morton describes, such as the shaming and bullying around hot socio-political topics that take place across the political spectrum, from my own social feeds. But other aspects of online life she describes, like the careful curation of how domestic life is presented, were either totally alien to me or things I just hadn't noticed. This is partly because of the mainstream, Middle American focus of the book; also, as the author admits, her subjects skew female. "I think social media is quite gendered, it's reinforcing gender norms in a lot of ways," she says. "Men and women have pretty different relationships to social media, and they were too different for me to comfortably fit in one book. I have heard from men who have read it, and they're like 'I live in this world, I belong to this representational environment. I don't really post in it, but my wife posts in it and it affects me.' So they know about it, but they don't contribute to it."

Jezer-Morton, a mother of two sons who writes a parenting column, Brooding, for *New York* magazine's *The Cut*, argues that this online gender divide has some unwholesome side effects IRL. "Domestic environments are becoming more feminized, and we have the kind of exile of teenage boys into the basement, the man cave," she explains. "This idea that public spaces in the house have to look good, because they're going to be represented in photos, and man stuff is ugly and yucky and needs to be pushed away – that's really fuckin' weird. And it makes you think, wow, the manosphere is obviously really troubling and deplorable, and it's not like these guys have a point, but it's not unconnected. There's this sense of 'We don't belong, they don't want us. They won't accept us.' It's not like there's a direct arrow, but these are related ideas."

Some of the most compelling parts of the book are Jezer-Morton's descriptions of her childhood growing up on the Vermont commune, an experience with which she makes interesting comparisons to the communities that form online. I found myself wanting to read more about her unique upbringing. "My editor was also like that. 'More, more!'" she laughs. "I would love to write about the commune, and I have a lot of things I've thought about, but there are people I would need to check in with first… I can't tell you how many people have been like 'This is the money project. Just do it, let's go.' And it's very appealing to me, but it's also horrifying that I would do something that would hurt anyone in the service of my success."

Although she admits that her love for social media has dimmed over the years, I couldn't help but note with bemusement that on my ever more infrequent check-ins to the platform formerly known as Twitter, there she is still sharing witticisms and throwing shade just like in the good old days. "I'm gonna tell you, I still like that platform," she says with a hint of mischief. "I know it's trash, I know it's garbage, I know it's owned by Elon Musk – like, I know it's categorically bad. But… that's probably the one I like the best."

Many individuals and institutions (including the *mRb*) have shut their accounts on the accursed platform, some decamping to the more gentle pastures of Bluesky. "I have an account, but I never use it," says Jezer-Morton of this friendlier, if less edgy, alternative. "I find it super boring and annoying. And I know that Twitter is bad, but I still like it better." Tying her observations in with the book's theme of online personality curation, she continues: "There's this really powerful undercurrent on Bluesky of reputation management. This is the thing I find most troubling about all of this, is the cultivation of the fact that you're right. It's like, 'My beautiful English garden of all my correct opinions.' And I just find that fuckin' the worst. I like that Twitter is a bit self-loathing, and a bit… maybe some of us really are stupid or awful. And there's something a bit more human about it to me." mRb

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

poetry

PLUMBELLINA LAMB

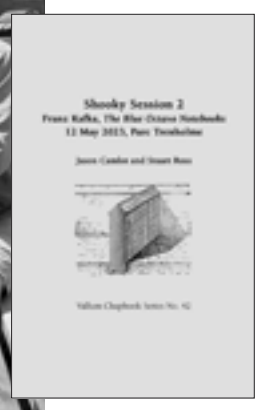


WAREHOUSEPHOTOWORKS









Missed Connections with Tall Girls
Gwen Aube
LittlePuss Press
$14.95, paperback, 104pp
9781964322971

Not everyone has a friend like ginger Christmas princess, the subject of two poems that bookend the first section of Gwen Aube's debut collection, *Missed Connections with Tall Girls*.

Clad in Walmart yoga pants and flanked by her depressed pitbull, she's rendered with loving nostalgia, vividly depicting the grime and sparkle of trans experience in a techno-capitalist world. This care will make you feel like you've loved ginger Christmas princess your whole life while dazzling you with her newness. It is unsurprising and well-deserved that this feat, and the poet behind it, were recently recognized by the Writers' Trust of Canada's Dayne Ogilvie Prize for 2SLGBTQ+ Emerging Writers.

Multiple registers of all-caps vivacity run throughout the work. A potent cocktail of humour and aggression in the imperative "DOC I THINK I'M A FUCKING WOMAN. / WOMEN HAVE VAGINAS. GIVE ME MY FREE MONEY NOW" is countered by headline-style updates on the capitalist hellscape–"PALANTIR IS UP / AND TRADING 46x ON REVENUE" – and the timeless harkening of "COME YE NEEDY AND BROKEN / GIRLS." Aube is as loud about injustice as she is about love, creating a meticulously balanced book that is critical without being callous, celebratory without being saccharine.

One could say that the final section, "For Herma," is the most outward facing for its ekphrastic focus on Gustav Klimt's *Hope I*, but it reflects the most heart-breakingly personal themes in the book: the desire for the possibility of pregnancy and the despair in its absence. Even, or maybe especially, when faced with the limits of the flesh, community resounds as the answer, whether in the clinic-white walls of Ottawa's National Gallery or the scrawled-on bathroom stalls of Montreal's Brasserie Beaubien.

So if the back cover blurb of Aube's debut doesn't grab you – "train-hopping, pill-popping, fur-wearing, sink-pissing, tranny punk odes!" – then the depth of her heart, and the gaggle of girls within it, will.

Shooky Session 2: Franz Kafka, The Blue Octavo Notebooks, 12 May 2023, Parc Trenholme
Jason Camlot and Stuart Ross
Vallum
$12, paperback, 28pp

On a park bench in NDG's Parc Trenholme, Jason Camlot and Stuart Ross took turns reading aloud from Franz Kafka's *The Blue Octavo Notebooks* while the other composed poems. I imagine it was a sort of newfangled séance for the modernist writer, in which Kafka gifted the poets his penchant for absurdity, then hung back, amazed at how they exercised it with both humour and heart.

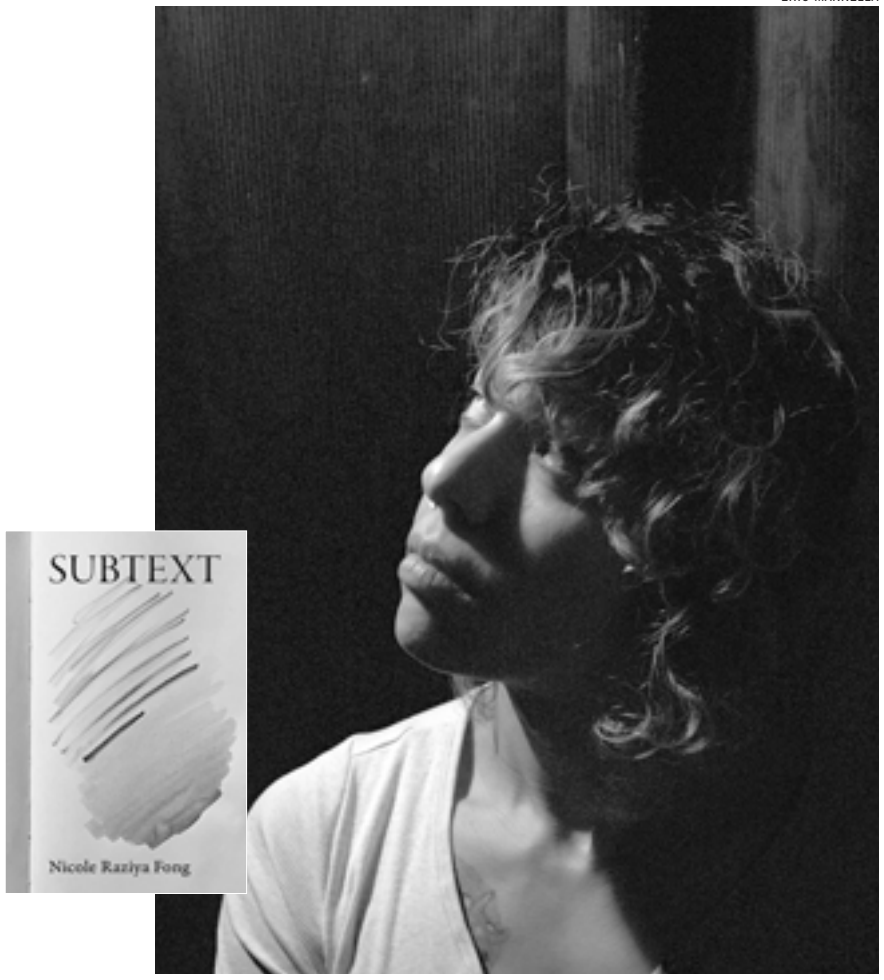
The result of this practice is the chapbook *Shooky Session 2: Franz Kafka, The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, a part of a larger manuscript titled *THE SHOOKY SESSIONS: A Litany.* This second installment features simplified snippets of Kafka's work, such as the pithy "Everyone is a room" as opposed to Kafka's "Everyone carries a room about inside him." However, "an indestructible / plastic bazooka that / fires kosher chickens" and recording artist "David Bowel" are certainly the poets' own, along with the shirking of sense in favour of play. One poem promises to define meaninglessness in its very last line. A large cast of picaresque characters such as the neighbour of the Senior Inspector float through the text like spectres, punching imperatives through rules of decorum: "Walk into a wall. / Climb into a cauldron." In other words, there is value in feeling the world viscerally, rather than cerebrally, of inhaling the odd lush scents of the free-association swamp without the "thong / of knowledge" riding up, so to speak.

Shooky Session 2, at an easily digestible twenty-eight pages, is not so much a "distillation" of another's work, with all the word's sterility – it is a romp in and around the meaning of meaning, of the interplay between art and truth. The full manuscript is sure to be a testament to what can happen when two poets simply listen.

Batten Down
Su Croll
McGill-Queen's University Press
$19.95, paperback, 144pp
9780228029342

From Cinderella and her stifling glass slipper to Dorothy's burden of completing "unfinished men" in *The Wizard of Oz*, Su Croll's fourth poetry collection *Batten Down* depicts women throughout history constrained by the female experience. In a collection fizzing with witchiness, myth,

ERIC MANNELLA





circus, and games of strategy and luck, the curtain is not only pulled back on the anti-feminist nature of cultural narratives, but also on their making, such as Alfred Hitchcock's use of real birds to attack lead actress Tippi Hedren in the 1963 film *The Birds*. If there is a line between fact and fiction, Croll's work expounds its blurriness with both a researched and imaginative eye.

Croll's voice performs acrobatic feats throughout the text. The speaker's moxie, seemingly inspired by transatlantic vocabulary of 1920s-1950s cinema, is particularly delicious, with morsels like "straw-headed hoofer" and "a lethal *soupçon* of homespun / hogwash." But Croll also knows when to rein it in, such as in a poem about the systematic rape of Gisèle Pelicot. Stark and insistent, the poem reminds us that these events are no mere "story": "I meant *real* and *factual*. / I meant *current*. I meant *contemporary* and *true*."

After impressively blending levity and severity, the collection ends on the former with a dialogue between Anne Boleyn and her daughter, Elizabeth I. And while the need to describe the mystical machinations that allow for their beyond-the-grave interaction to occur takes up much of this section, the aim is clear: to inspire hope for the transgenerational fight for women's freedom. *Batten Down*'s fairytale world, with its uncanny and off-kilter scenes, may be deceptively close to the one we live in. But that doesn't mean it can't be rewritten.

SUBTEXT
Nicole Raziya Fong
Talonbooks
$19.95, paperback, 86pp
9781772017076

"I have become / the surface between reflections," Nicole Raziya Fong writes in *SUBTEXT*. This simple yet striking statement sets up a chain of mirrors that overlay the philosophical on the personal on the historical and even the dramatic. Growing more visually complex with each section – as heading-style text hangs askew, dialogue is encased in black boxes, and columns counter centre-justified sections – the collection vividly encapsulates the difficulty of knowing the diasporic self in a fractured reality.

The first section, "Neutral Grey," poses complex questions in clear language – "Is it more authentic to write from / language or from identity?" – alongside reversed, inverted, and therefore unreadable excerpts from the ledger of a mid-nineteenth-century ship that transported indentured workers. Fong strips a history of subjugation of its comprehensibility, and this formal experimentation becomes a visceral rewriting of history that is felt as much as read.

The titular section defamiliarizes cafés, diners, and offices with the frayed logic and immense significance of dreams. Perhaps in accurate dream-like fashion, the poems feel flighty and veiled, but Fong has outfitted them with companions: characters Adananmus and Preciforous muse on each scene's meaning in philosophical dialogue-style scripts. Sharing this experience with characters in the work stabilizes the reader in the "Irreconcilable rifts / in my understanding of a person" while allowing Fong to remain true to the difficulty inherent in such questions.

A push and pull between clarity and complexity from a writer attuned to her work's frequency, *SUBTEXT* suggests that while differences may not be able to be fully closed, connecting across them is undeniably fruitful.

The Electrocutionist
Danielle Hubbard
McGill-Queen's University Press
$19.95, paperback, 144pp
9780228027935

"I can't find / the self-discipline / domesticity / to stay put, or conversely / the galvanization to leave," writes Danielle Hubbard on the speaker's extramarital affair in *The Electrocutionist*. This unflinching honesty is the mode through which Hubbard explores shifting relationships, including, alongside the affair, a mother's cancer diagnosis and a sibling's coming out. By placing such different transition phases in conversation with each other, *The Electrocutionist* questions which changes allow us to soar and which send us plummeting to the earth.

Holding the human and the more-than-human together is a feisty, playful voice. The Canadian landscape is a site of reprieve from the messiness of human love, explored through running, cycling, swimming, and hiking; landmarks like the Assiniboine River and Mount Douglas stand as reminders for the unchangeability of change, where "sky is a perforated membrane, the sun all over the place, dripping." Hubbard takes full advantage of the opportunities for lush imagery in these settings.

Word associations such as "Washington is tons of fun, Washingfun, washing / the dishes, the laundry, the laundering / of truths" mixes lightheartedness with the speaker's palpable dark side. Larger-scale play, such as poems "Mono," "Duo or Die," and "Tri Tri Try" stringing together the three sections offers a cheeky wink to the reader.

No matter the subject or the style, Hubbard prioritizes imagery over interpretation, narrative over lyricism, and visual over cerebral clarity. This lack of moralization is a clever choice in a work dealing with such complex human interactions, encouraging the reader to take the winding trail through missteps and new beginnings, hearing the birdsong along the way. mrb

Jade Palmer is a poet living between Toronto and Montreal. She is the managing editor of *carte blanche* and is pursuing a master's degree in creative writing from the University of Toronto. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *CV2*, *The Fiddlehead*, *The New Quarterly*, and *Prairie Fire*.

By Esinam Beckley

Syrus Marcus Ware and Ra'anaa Yaminah Ekundayo

Irresistible Revolutions

JALANI MORGAN



SYRUS MARCUS WARE

Free to Be More: Creative Activism in the Era of Black Lives Matter, a collection edited by Syrus Marcus Ware and Ra'anaa Yaminah Ekundayo with d'bi.young anitafrika, does not merely take the reader through a chronological roster of contemporary Black artists and activists. It traces the lineage of their survival mechanics and their absolute refusal to be contained by the grey definitions of colonial institutions.

The anthology's foundation is built upon a profound observation by Assata Shakur, who lamented the tragedy of being born into a world that forces one to be a "reluctant struggler," rather than allowing them the unburdened freedom to simply be a gardener or a sculptor. The text functions as a direct, architectural response to this forced struggle, operating as an Afrofuturist blueprint in which the contributors are already occupying and living within the liberated futures they are fighting to build. As co-editor Ekundayo notes, the sheer act of curating this work means "we're truly living like we're already there," transforming the book into a physical manifestation of "our ancestors' wildest dreams."

I found myself experiencing a profound realization when examining the book's structural refusal to separate carceral violence from creative response. Co-editor Ware explains that the "hotbed of activists uprising" of the last decade was forged directly in response to the mechanics of carceral violence, channelling Toni Cade Bambara's concept of "creating irresistible revolutions" to explicitly disrupt that system.

Stories of resistance, such as Kyisha Williams' film *The Zoo* (2021), following a Black queer person navigating life off probation, and Rodney Diverlus' Vakabond character, sit directly alongside the trauma of police brutality. This is a deliberate framing; as Ware notes, abolition is fundamentally about "tearing down the walls and then, over here, planting seeds for what we want to grow in its place."

This structural rebellion acts as the ultimate mirror held up to the art world's traditional hierarchy, which demands a manageable, trauma-fuelled asset it can audit. Ware explicitly outlines the hypocrisy of the traditional art machine, citing Susan Cahan's *Mounting Frustration*, a critical examination of the art institution's role during times of Black power, and Black liberation, to expose how museums tend to only acquire and showcase Black art during times of civil unrest.

The institution's lack of critical engagement means these vital works are often relegated to a "side gallery off the side of the gift shop" or reduced to a "short Instagram takeover." This recalls Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum*, which we analyzed in my Concordia art history seminars. The landmark installation juxtaposed existing historical artifacts exposing the hypocrisy, and institutional contradictions, hidden within the museum's own collection.



Free to Be More
Creative Activism in the Era of Black Lives Matter
Edited by Syrus Marcus Ware and Ra'anaa Yaminah Ekundayo with d'bi.young anitafrika
University of Regina Press
$32.95, paperback, 320pp
9781779401328

Free to Be More shatters the machine of art business and art curation entirely. It serves as a necessary, self-contained counter-archive. "This is a book that is biased for us," Ware asserts, emphasizing that it ensures Black artists maintain absolute ownership over the discourse surrounding their own brilliance.

This sovereign, independent universe is explored in jamilah malika abu-bakare's chapter "Fugitive Sound Art," which analyzes sound as both a method of refusal and a sanctuary of refuge. Ware praises abu-bakare's scholarly engagement, noting how such analysis reveals the "rebellious and radical nature" of Black artistic practices. By defining sound as a wave of protection that undermines the dominant category, abu-bakare elevates the sociological weight of what it means to create space, and frequency, in an otherwise hostile environment.

This collection is not a passive visual representation. It is the sociological normalization of a community claiming its environment at its maximum potential. This embodied reclamation is echoed with striking precision in "The Art of Step," by Kayin Queeley and Natasha "Tashe" Clery, which chronicles the history of stepping, the African-American percussive dance form, as a tool for both community building and resistance. Clery did not merely introduce step to Northern Turtle Island at Montreal's Vanier College in 1991; she injected a radically unapologetic Black presence into an institutional space by pitching it to the school as a cheerleading squad for basketball games. Clery unmasks the hidden culture of the era, noting the profound empowerment of arriving fully geared up to set a tone the minute they walked in and made noise on the bleachers. This unapologetic presence even sparked a direct rivalry with Dawson College. Yet the institution's failure to document this history, leaving zero VHS records, memorabilia, or written archives of the team, highlights how easily Black cultural milestones are relegated to the ether when they exist outside the dominant grey definitions.

NICHOLAS DEBROSSE



RA'ANAA YAMINAH EKUNDAYO

Queeley, founder of the Montreal Steppers in 2019, traces this lineage of survival mechanics directly to the ancestral. Queeley explicitly notes that when the traditional drum was taken away from enslaved peoples, the physical body itself became an instrument of resistance. "When I go boom, boom, boom on the drum, we are planning," he writes, describing how stepping was never just performance, but a deeply coded strategy whose stomps literally shake the ground. Queeley experienced a radical belonging when he realized his choreographic abilities, first explored in a Plattsburgh university choir in 2008 – choreographies which were not just learned, but unlocked from a path that preceded him. It is a prime example of what happens when one's potential is fully met, existing before the world has figured out how to name or contain it.

Free to Be More shows us how the corporate structure judges and also commodifies Black presence. Queeley and

continued on next page

MONTOUR AND MILLER

continued from page 10

Still, *Everyday Reconciliation*, straightforward and essayistic, will not let you forget its purpose as "A Guide to Action and Change for All of Us." And perhaps that is exactly what we need; or perhaps it is just where we need to start. "Knowledge is power" is the adage that comes to mind – or maybe knowledge is just a means of messing up less often – as Miller writes, "Most mistakes have come down to my knowledge gap."

Whether this book is powerful or simply informative, the fact is that reconciliation – sometimes better described as "conciliation," writes Montour – is a duty for any non-Indigenous Canadian. Even the globally minded among us, who prefer to chime in on the burgeoning conversation of Canada's European and international presence, would do well to acquaint ourselves with our domestic history first. The pressure to reconcile properly may also feel immense – such that the pressure of evaluating this topic led your reviewer to immense procrastination – but it's also important to remember there is no shame in trying. "There's a lot of ignorance, and that's okay. It's not to be ashamed of because that's by design," Montour says. "The school systems were designed not to educate about a different perspective. But in today's world, there's no excuse."

In some ways it is impossible to even review something so objectively important and candid. In some ways this is not really a review; rather just a few words ahead of all the words, advice, reflections, and history lessons to come after, should *Everyday Reconciliation* be something you choose to embark on. 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.

THEATRE

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I'm sorry to say, if only for the missed opportunity for a smooth segue, that Polonius's "Very like a whale" is not one of the quotes referenced in Ann-Marie MacDonald's playful deconstruction, *Hamlet-911*.

In MacDonald's meta-theatrical black comedy, which played at Stratford Festival in 2022, television-star-turned-stage-trouper Guinness Menzie is about to step into the outsize shoes of his father, Rex, a legendary Hamlet at Stratford – who, Guinness learns to his dismay, has just been cast opposite him as the Ghost of Hamlet's Father. But who will play all-devouring mother Gertrude? His actual mum, Jessica? Or his wife, Sue? Such queasy questions pale into relative insignificance after a bike accident propels Guinness through a portal in which his own life is transformed into a shattered mirror image of the great play.

MacDonald has, of course, shown herself a dab hand both with dysfunctional family dynamics in her celebrated novel *Fall on Your Knees*, and with anarchic Shakespearean deconstruction in her breakthrough 1988 play, *Goodnight Desdemona, (Good Morning Juliet)*.

In the latter, a hapless Ontarian professor is magically transported into two Shakespearean tragedies, her bemused interventions transmuting them into raucous feminist comedies. *Hamlet-911* utilises its magical portal device for a different dramatic strategy, reconfiguring the original play as a reflection of Guinness's own life, as if, like Claudius, he's seeing his own sins (including domestic violence) in a play-within-a-play.

Events swirl around him and play on repeat. A stage manager prompts mundane lines he's supposed to say over breakfast. "Am I in Hell?" he wonders. If so, it's a Dante-shaped one, and gleefully riding the concentric circles is a Yorick figure who's part stand-up comedian, part Indigenous trickster, part Virgil-esque guide through Guinness's dark middle-aged angst.

It's largely a character study, then, and one might be forgiven for wondering why we should care about this rather pallid individual whose claim to fame is starring in a television sitcom called *Vampire Dad*.

But MacDonald's main focus is on the social and cultural upheavals of recent years as filtered through the Canadian "court" of the Stratford Festival, with Guinness teetering indecisively between the achievements and privileges of the "old guard" (represented by the aptly named Rex, who's both admirably accomplished and grotesquely retrograde), and his duty-of-care to a future he doesn't understand and which will most likely leave him sidelined.

MacDonald introduces another Hamlet-figure in Jeremy, a basement-dwelling teenage fan of *Vampire Dad* whose tortured struggle over whether "to be or not to be" adds suicidal ideation to the play's at times unruly swirl of concerns.

This edition includes a thoughtful if slightly dry academic introduction from literature professor Neta Gordon (it *is* a scholarly imprint), though she does conduct a lively interview, also included here, with MacDonald and her wife, Alisa Palmer, who directed the Stratford premiere and whose idea the play originally was.

Crucial to appreciating MacDonald's play, and to an understanding of why this most progressively feminist of writers chose to focus on a straight white male antihero, is the context of the original production as outlined in these supplements. It was written largely as a companion piece to a *Hamlet* "proper" which played in the same Stratford season, and which, in a living example of the balance of tradition and progress championed in MacDonald's play, starred gender-fluid BIPOC actor Amaka Umeh. mrb

Jim Burke was the theatre correspondent for the *Montreal Gazette*. As a playwright, he adapted *Moby Dick*, which toured the UK in a theatre ship and was produced in Montreal by Persephone Productions. His play *Cornered* was presented by Infinithéâtre as a guest production in 2013.

HARARI

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just by the bodies we inhabit, but also by the social roles imposed on us. With nothing to lose, Samia proposes an experiment: she asks Rachel/David to sleep with her in the hope of reversing the transformation. Whether the phenomenon works that way remains unclear.

The body-swapping premise, the art, the setting, and the characters will appeal to a wide audience. But readers should bear in mind that, as the title suggests, only David's fate, both inside and out, is resolved. I'd grown attached to the outside of Rachel and the inside of Samia, with whom readers spend considerable time, and I was disappointed that we found out so little about their fates. Let's hope a sequel is in the works. mrb

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



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WARE AND EKUNDAYO

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Clery shatter the illusion of post-2020 institutional progress, exposing how the media heavily focused on the George Floyd tragedy while Black communities saw no financial gain and other communities grew richer. Institutions frequently offered fifteen-minute showcases without genuine monetary investment or long-term infrastructural change, creating performative five-year anti-Black racism initiatives that ultimately yielded no results. Clery points out the reality that Black lives are still utilized as the source of political pandering, while the actual wealth and pride of Black history is buried by those with the power to dictate.

The anthology continually asserts the institutional gaze by replacing it with a self-determined, highly sophisticated vision. Yung Yemi (Adeyemi Adegbesan) utilizes what he terms "remixology" and Pan-Africanist themes to navigate the dichotomy between the limitless diversity of the diaspora, informed by his own Nigerian and Swiss heritage, and the externally imposed homogeneity of "Blackness." This same drive for autonomy fuelled the 2020 Kensington Market Black Lives Matter mural, an intervention entirely self-funded and executed by Toronto's Black artist community. Ware pushes this subversion directly into the domestic and spatial sphere with his *Activist Wallpaper Series*, intentionally replacing traditional toile wallpaper, which historically depicted the white elite in bucolic scenes.

The concept of claiming absolute ownership of physical space is disrupted and reclaimed throughout the book's documentation of local interventions. Ekundayo highlights the sociological normalization of Black resistance through Montreal's specific actions, such as the toppling of the James McGill statue. The dismantling of this monument illustrates the power of the masses demanding change outside of traditional, bureaucratic government channels, proving that "it is the people who instigate the change." Ekundayo traces a similarly active, unburdened belonging to the *Never Was Average* bilingual ground mural painted in Montreal in 2020. Witnessing that massive public declaration served as a catalyst, sparking the realization that "we can really do whatever we want." It was a visual confirmation that Black Lives Matter is not merely an organization; as Ekundayo states, "It is a movement. It's a battle cry. It's an understanding."

The creators within *Free to Be More* do not ask for an institution's permission to exist. They have designed, and inhabited a brilliantly cultured, sovereign universe of their own. mrb

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.

young readers



The Color of My Difference

Mc Knoell Alexis
Translated by Ann Marie Boulanger
Orca Book Publishers
$14.95, paperback, 120pp
9781459842489
Ages 9–12

A young boy is headed to his first day at a new school and he's terrified. Here, people drive luxury cars, live in houses along avenues, and the sidewalks are clean and neat, so different from the ramshackle neighbourhood where he grew up. But the hardest part is being a Black student in a school that is mostly white.

The boy feels disoriented, lost, and friendless, and when the teacher pronounces his name – each syllable in agonizing slowness – the class erupts in laughter and the boy is set apart even further. Students pick on the food he brings for lunch, a police officer stops him for questioning on his way home, and he battles stereotypes about what it is to be Black.

Only when a fight breaks out and he's suspended does he finally tell his mother how he's feeling, learning a lesson about being proud of who he is and where he comes from.

Mc Knoell Alexis plays with rhythm, rhyme, and layout to craft a story that is so much more than words on a page. Unlike more traditional children's books that play with bright colours and images, this one focuses on the words themselves, which grow and shrink, fade, form images like question marks and arrows, stagger across the page, and stand out against shifting backgrounds of black and white – showing how words can harm as well as create powerful, positive change.



Based on Alexis' own experience as a Haitian growing up in Montreal, *The Color of My Difference* is a heartfelt reminder that being different can truly be one's greatest strength.

✦ ✦ ✦

Finding My Spark

Isabelle Jameson
Illustrated by Sylvain Cabot
Translated by Ann Marie Boulanger
Orca Book Publishers
$18.95, hardcover, 40pp
9781459843356
Ages 9–12

When author Isabelle Jameson's son came out as trans, his family searched for a book to help him break the news to his class – but came up empty. So Jameson decided to write one herself, to help children and families navigate the difficult and joyous transition to an authentic new identity.

In *Finding My Spark*, Alex struggles with who he really is. No longer interested in dresses and growing increasingly uncomfortable in his changing body, Alex begins to wear baggy clothes, cuts his hair short, and paints his room a dark and uncheerful colour.

With help from his therapist, Alex decides to write a letter to his mom and come out to his family, then his friends and classmates. Now that his outside matches his inside and he's allowed to fully shine, Alex can finally be his true self.

This book is designed as an accessible tool to help older kids understand gender identity and provide a positive example of coming out as trans. Sylvain Cabot's thoughtful illustrations provide a sense of calm and community that allows young readers to find acceptance in themselves or support a friend.

✦ ✦ ✦

Muriel and the Mystery

Charlotte Parent
Tundra Books
$24.95, hardcover, 56pp
9781774889152
Ages 4–7



Award-winning illustrator Charlotte Parent has released her first book as both author and illustrator, blending her signature artistic style of gentle colours and playful patterns with a delightful story about facing change and fear of the unknown.

Little Muriel, the shrew, leaves her house in search of snails, just as she does every morning. But one day she encounters something new and unfamiliar: a mysterious black smudge hiding beneath a plant leaf. Suddenly, this mystery appears everywhere Muriel looks – in the forest, the sky, even in her cooking pot and in her own bed.

Her safe, predictable world is shaken, and after trying to ignore the mystery and sweep it out the door, Muriel finally decides she's had enough. She marches up to the mystery's burrow to confront it, only to learn that what's mysterious isn't always scary, and that facing her fears can lead to some unlikely friendships.

✦ ✦ ✦

Phoebe's Pockets

Nadine Robert
Illustrated by Philip Giordano
Milky Way Picture Books
$28.95, hardcover, 40pp
9781990252464
Ages 3–5



Tumble, Paddle, Nibble, Splash... Can you help Phoebe find all her little friends?

For her third birthday, Phoebe heads off on a treasure hunt to find ten animal pals who are hiding around the neighbourhood. She looks in the barn, the garden, at the seashore, and even in the museum, filling her pockets and finding friendship in the most unlikely places.

This colourful, interactive book is perfect for young readers to immerse themselves in a fantastical world where furry friends come to life. Just pop out the cutouts at the back of the book, follow the clues, and discover which pocket each animal belongs to. Can Phoebe collect them all before she heads home?

The game-like feel, easy-to-read rhymes, and vibrant illustrations are an invitation to explore the book again and again, with something fun and new to find every time.

✦ ✦ ✦

Mr. Kuroki's Garden

Anne Renaud
Illustrated by Ohara Hale
Crocodile Books
$25.95, hardcover, 40pp
9781623715755
Ages 5–7



On a family farm in rural Japan, Mr. and Mrs. Kuroki work, raise a family, and dream of travelling the world to meet different people and learn about their lives. Until one day Mrs. Kuroki begins to lose her sight, along with parts of herself, and the world grows dark and small around her.

Heartbroken, Mr. Kuroki wonders how he can keep his wife from fading away and find ways for her to smile and laugh again. That's when he decides to turn his farmland into a garden, planting fragrant pink *shibazakura* to attract bees and butterflies and cutting pathways through the growth for his wife to wander. As news spreads of this magnificent garden, people from all over come to visit, bringing the world to Mrs. Kuroki and carrying her laughter on the wind again.

Anne Renaud's gentle, loving story is a lesson in kindness, acceptance, and care, depicting how a small gesture can grow to have an enormous impact on someone you love. The delicate illustrations by Ohara Hale provide a soft touch to difficult moments in the Kurokis' lives, with colourful explosions of pink to mark the path back to happiness and well-being. Readers may even spot the curious cat hidden throughout the book!

Tina Wayland holds an MA in Creative Writing from Concordia University, winning the department's McKeen Award in 2021 and 2023. She's published in *carte blanche*, *yolk*, *Headlight*, *Scrivener*, and *LBRNTH*, and has been a finalist for the CBC Nonfiction Prize, gritLIT short story contest, and *Room Magazine*'s short forms contest. Tina is currently completing a book about her Lithuanian grandmother, funded by the Canada Council for the Arts.

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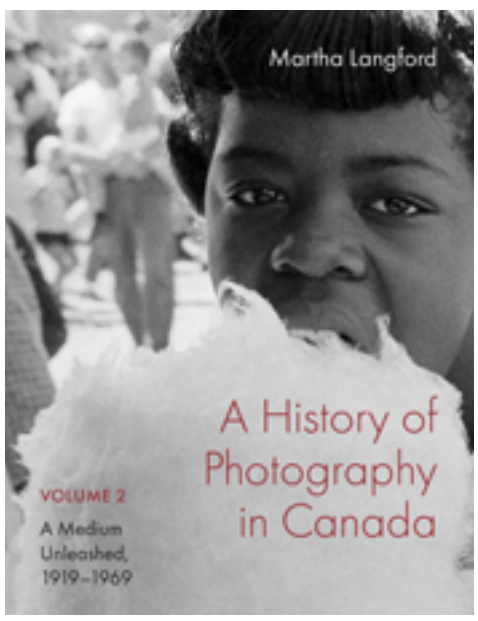
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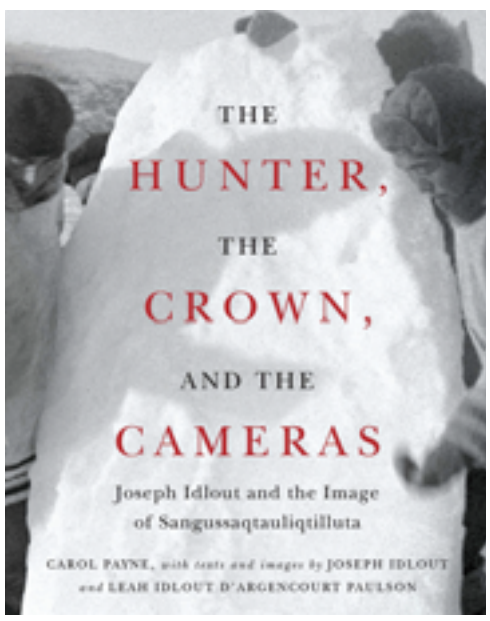
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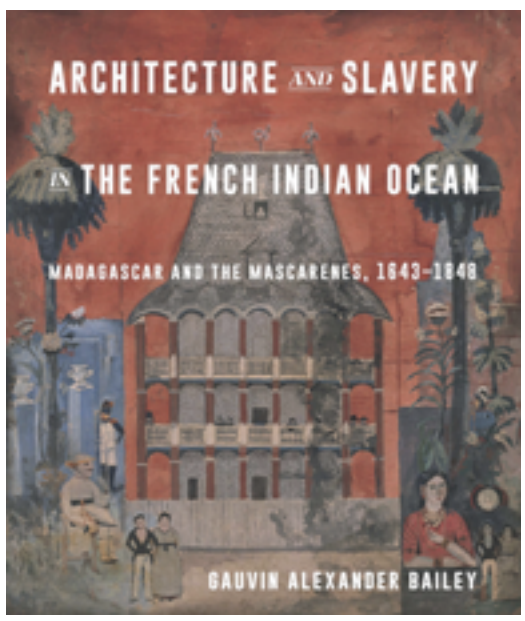
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