

SEPTEMBER 2025

DAVID MARKS SHRIBMAN Bottom of the Ninth **SANDRA MARTIN** Returning to Notre-Dame
DANIEL WOOLF Sins and Statuary **JAMES BROOKE-SMITH** Take It from Oscar Wilde

Literary Review of Canada

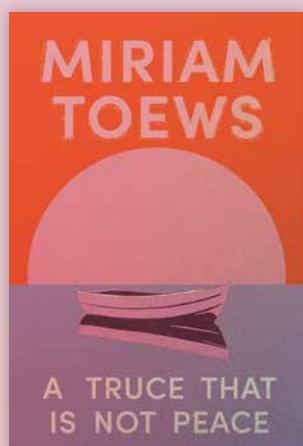
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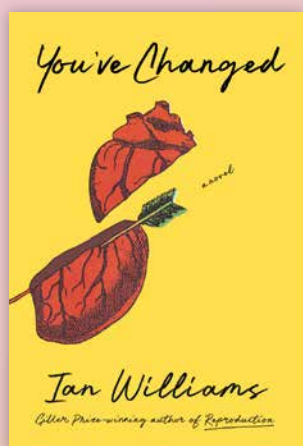


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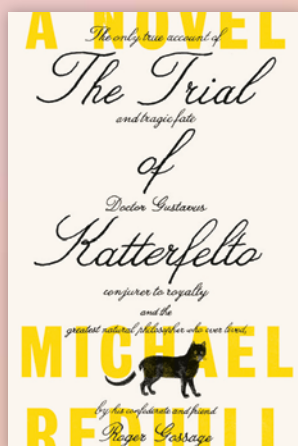
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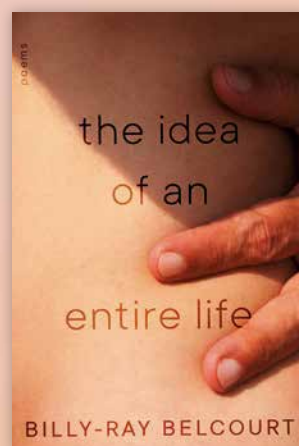
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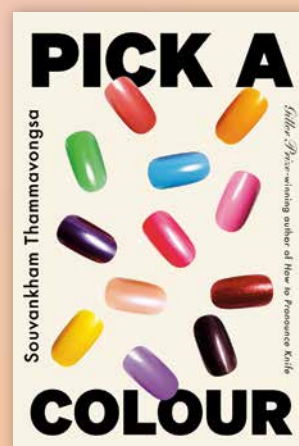
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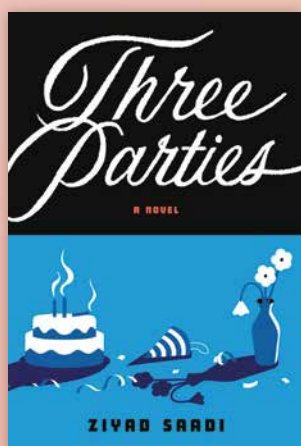


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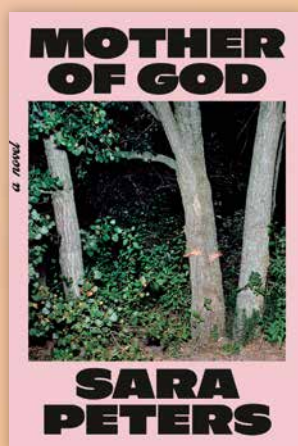
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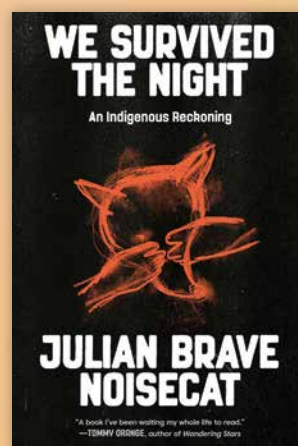
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Literary Review of Canada

A JOURNAL OF IDEAS

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OUR CONTRIBUTORS

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deputy minister for intergovernmental affairs,
as well as for natural resources.

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for the 21st Century and wrote *In the City*
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Stacey May Fowles has published five books.
Her memoir, *The Lost Season*, is scheduled
for release in early 2026.

Graham Fraser is the author of
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Royal Society of Canada's Lorne Pierce Medal.

David Marks Shribman attended his first
professional baseball game at Fenway Park
in 1962. It just happened to be a no-hitter.

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documentary filmmaker based in Victoria.

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at Queen's University, where he is also
principal emeritus.

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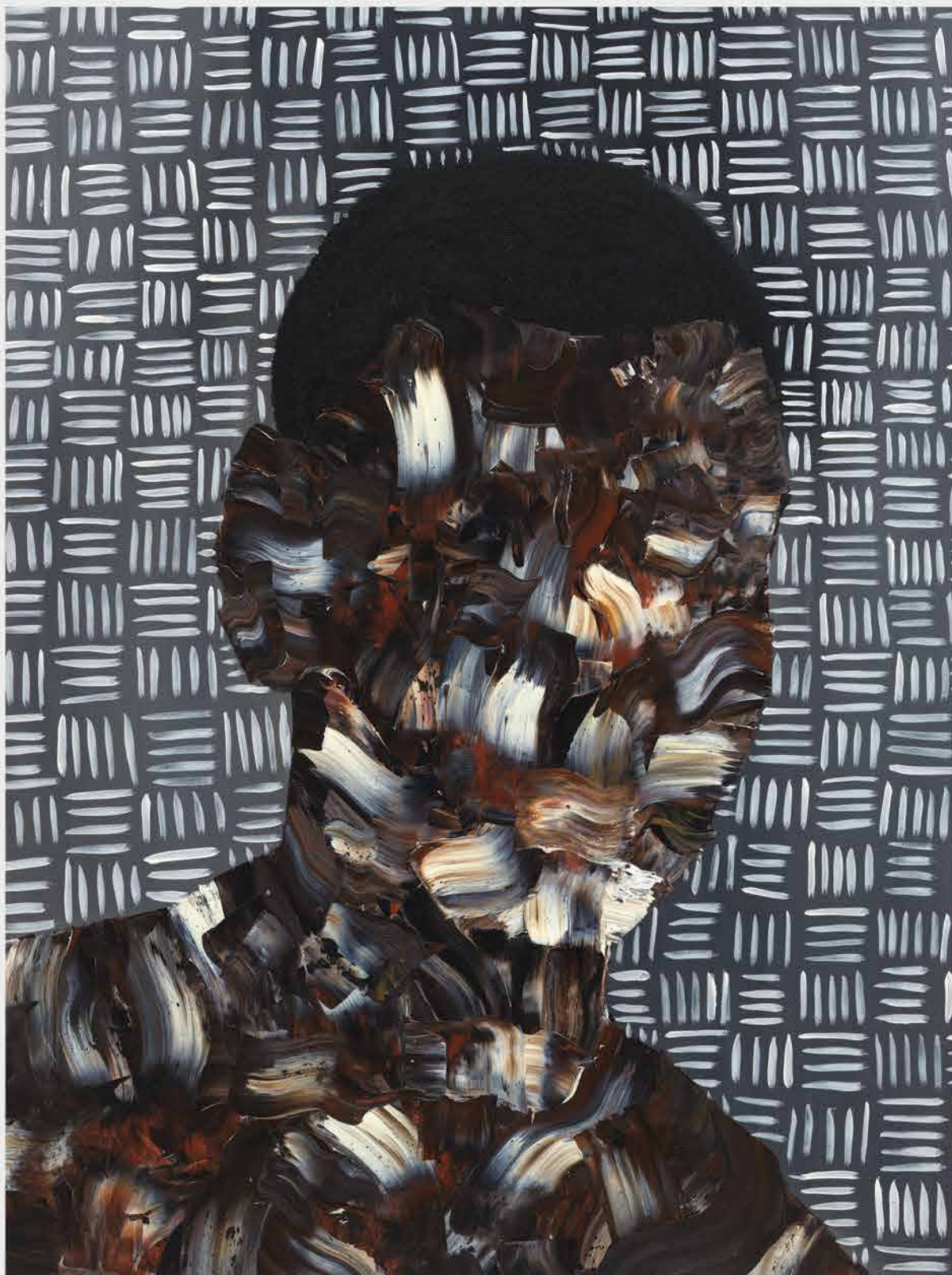


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The World of Interiors

KING LUDWIG II OF BAVARIA BEGAN construction on Neuschwanstein Castle in September 1869 and died, under mysterious circumstances, seventeen years later, before his dream was complete. That hasn't stopped some 80 million people from making the trek to the small Alpine village of Schwangau, Germany, to visit the unfinished fairy-tale palace that inspired Walt Disney's Sleeping Beauty Castle. Not long ago, on an abnormally hot afternoon, I was finally among those hiking up the steep trail to behold the landmark in person.

While I have wanted to see Neuschwanstein since I was a child and have read about it in countless books, I was not prepared for its relative modernity: the telephones, the automatic toilets, the once state-of-the-art kitchen, the conservatory's frameless glass door, the electric bell system that Ludwig used to summon his butler. Despite those impressive amenities — and despite the fact that this remains a nineteenth-century building — tourists regularly go online to grumble about the temperature. "You don't expect these attractions to have air conditioning, but other castles at least had fans running," a traveller from Minnesota moaned on Tripadvisor back in 2013. "The king forgot to install air conditioning," another American noted on a travel blog last year, "so maybe a cold day is better." As our summers grow hotter and hotter, I suspect such complaints will continue piling up.

Ludwig didn't forget the AC, of course. Air conditioning had not yet been invented by the time he drowned in Lake Starnberg, the term not yet coined. It was only in 1902 that Willis Carrier designed a mechanical cooling unit, to deal with excess moisture that was interfering with a Brooklyn printer's ink. Four years later, Stuart W. Cramer, a mill owner from North Carolina, filed a patent for his humidity-control system, using the phrase "air conditioning" for the first time.

Window air conditioners arrived in 1931, though few consumers could afford one. That same year, Sheldons Limited of Galt, Ontario, installed Canada's largest, most powerful air conditioner at the Imperial Theatre in downtown Toronto. "We Now Manufacture Weather," an advertisement in the *Saturday Globe* boasted. "Our gigantic refrigerating machines have a cooling effect of 340,000 pounds of melting ice per day!" Five years later, Canadian railways were all aboard, installing air conditioning on cars running between Montreal and Chicago.

After a rather slow start, air conditioning came for the masses in 1947, with the introduction of Henry Galson's low-cost compact window unit. Today there are roughly 2 billion air conditioners around the world, with 68 percent of Canadian households making use of one — up from 64 percent four years ago. As extreme heat events become more common and more prolonged, the International Energy Agency predicts there will be 5.6 billion units out there by 2050, which means ten new air conditioners are being sold every second.

According to the United Nations, air conditioning already accounts for roughly 4 percent of greenhouse gas emissions — double the contribution of the aviation industry. An increasing share comes from the cooling of data centres for cloud computing, cryptocurrency mining, and artificial intelligence. While access to tolerable temperatures is considered an environmental justice issue, the more we turn down the dial, the more we crank up the heat — especially since two-thirds of electricity production still comes from the burning of fossil fuels.

To partially untangle the Gordian knot that is air conditioning, a coalition of agencies and foundations, initiated by the government of India and backed by Sir Richard Branson, launched the \$3-million (U.S.) Global Cooling Prize in 2018, to incentivize "a breakthrough residential cooling technology that has at least 5x less climate impact when compared to a baseline unit." Two winners were announced three years later — China's Gree Electric Appliances and Japan's Daikin — though subsequent iterations of the contest have yet to be announced.

The sustainability of prizes, of the literary bent anyway, has been top of mind for many in the chattering classes these past few weeks. But as the mercury here and elsewhere shows no sign of falling on its own, we should collectively call for the revival of any competition that might help solve the air conditioning paradox.

At least that's what I thought as I hiked down the mountain after touring Ludwig's castle, dehydrated and drenched in sweat but very satisfied. Less enthusiastic tourists will always carp about something, but let's do what it takes to ensure that future visitors to Neuschwanstein aren't complaining about summertime temperatures that are even hotter than today's. Like so much of our built environment, the Swan King's enchanting retreat just wasn't made for this warming planet. ▲

Kyle Wyatt, Editor

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A WORD
AFTER A
WORD AFTER
A WORD
IS POWER.

Margaret Atwood

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ON THE COVER: Eldred Allen is a self-taught
Inuk photographer from Rigolet, Nunatsiavut,
Newfoundland and Labrador. Allen's work can be
found in the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, among
other public and private collections. He is represented
by the Stephen Bulger Gallery in Toronto.

Furthermore

RE: *Sting Operation*
by Noah Ciubotaru (July/August)

IN HIS REVIEW OF *CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY AT 50*, Noah Ciubotaru mentions the struggle with Quebec's proposed French proficiency requirement. In the 1960s, Queen's University included a course in French as part of the requirement for a bachelor of arts degree (I don't know if it still does). I recall a faculty meeting in which we were asked to consider the case of an unfortunate lad named Sherry, who had failed his French course four times. Someone proposed that we should defer opening the case of Sherry until just before lunch.

He was granted an exemption.

Robert A. Stairs
Peterborough, Ontario

RE: *Check It Out*
by Gilbert Reid (July/August)

WHILE I APPRECIATE THE POSITIVE TALE OF A Canadian start-up as much as the next person, perhaps some balance is in order. Relying solely on Gilbert Reid's review, having not read Larry MacDonald's *The Shopify Story* itself, I can't help but mention a few things that temper the fan fever: The failed initiative to establish fulfillment centre logistics. Fostering a daycare-for-adults-at-work environment, to the detriment of mature employees (not unique to Shopify). Then over-hiring during the COVID-19 online-shopping upswing, only to send many of the employees who survived to work from home in the post-pandemic crash, thus contributing to the hollowing out of downtown Ottawa.

As Reid observes, Nortel and BlackBerry are grave markers on these e-commerce shoals.

Brian Feeley
Toronto

RE: *Need Not Apply*
by Jeffrey Simpson (July/August)

DEEP REGARDS TO JEFFREY SIMPSON FOR THE INCISIVE review of Peter MacKinnon's *Confronting Illiberalism*. While I'm often aghast at the sometimes open racism I see in Saskatchewan and understand how some might be tempted to "hurry up" diversity and equity efforts by monkeying with simplistic hacks and patches offered by skewed versions of critical theory, I share MacKinnon's view that open discourse and merit are foundational for Canadian society.

Mike Sluchinski
Saskatoon

RE: *Raw Material*
by J. R. Patterson (July/August)

THE REVIEW OF ANDREAS AMMER'S *PORTRAIT OF AN Oyster* notes the presence of many references to visual and literary art, while the illustration by Tom Chitty shows the "mysteriously seductive bivalve" on stage. Surely it is singing Cole Porter's "Tale of the Oyster," a personal adventure tale concluding with: "For I've had a taste of society / And society has had a taste of me."

Kathleen McMorro
Toronto

RE: *Interior Designs*
by Kelvin Browne (July/August)

KELVIN BROWNE'S REVIEW OF *THE KELOWNA STORY: An Okanagan History* swept me off my feet and back in time to so many moments of excitement, delight, and peace. Even though I never lived in Kelowna, British Columbia.

My undying love for the warm, lakeside city began in the very early 1950s, when our family moved to Vancouver from Winnipeg. It was our father's good fortune as a CN railway porter to be assigned the Kelowna run, on a spur line that decoupled from the transcontinental route at Kamloops and ran south to an Okanagan paradise.

On rare weekends, when the load was expected to be light, my older sister and I, starting at ages eight and ten, would board the sleeping car, share an upper berth, enjoy breakfast in the linen-bedecked dining car, and peer out at Kalamalka Lake. This was heavenly but nothing compared with what lay before us after we pulled into Kelowna's CNR station. We would race to the beach and tear through all the stores from Woolworth's to Sweet 16. Our handful of coins might allow a Fudgsicle and perhaps a bag of chips. But who could be hungry with eyes feasting upon such a glorious setting? Our independence was fed by the two or three hours that Dad remained at his post, cleaning the car and preparing for departure. I fondly and hungrily remember him loading an incredibly rich summer bounty of cherries, apricots, peaches, and pears into the boxcar, all to be preserved in jars to be savoured in the winter months.

My next foray into this magical town was in 1959 and then again in 1960, when it hosted what was considered the best track and field meet of the season. The track was located at the beach just as you entered the city over the newly built bridge. Thirty paces after crossing the finish line in the sweltering heat, we could wade into the cool blue waters of Okanagan Lake. Pure bliss! For my older brother and me, these were very

successful competitions, and we were featured in the local newspapers, posed with Miss Kelowna. We both went on to bigger and more prestigious athletic events, without the lakeside hijinks or the ease of joyful camaraderie.

After being incarcerated for more than a decade in the prison-like Woodlands School in New Westminster and then another fifteen years at Tranquille Sanatorium outside Kamloops — all for the crime of being intellectually challenged — our younger brother was awarded his freedom in Kelowna. Barton was able to find love, support, and caring employment at Falk's Chrysler dealership. He purchased a home in a trailer park on the outskirts of town, and his membership in a local church gave him a family. For the last decade of Barton's life, he lived "free from the institution," his lifelong mantra. His joy became my joy.

In the years since his 1989 accidental death on Highway 97, I continued to visit Kelowna for its annual July 1 track meet, relocated just outside the downtown core and near the cemetery. Working as an athletics official was a good excuse to tour with dear friends some of the nearby wineries. But, most significantly, these track and field duties allowed me to walk just across the road and visit precious Barton.

This city where I never lived still holds so much of my heart.

Valerie Jerome
Vancouver

And some golden nuggets...

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE *LITERARY REVIEW OF Canada* for being named Best Magazine (Art, Literary, and Culture) at the National Magazine Awards. It's a superb publication.

J. D. M. Stewart
via LinkedIn

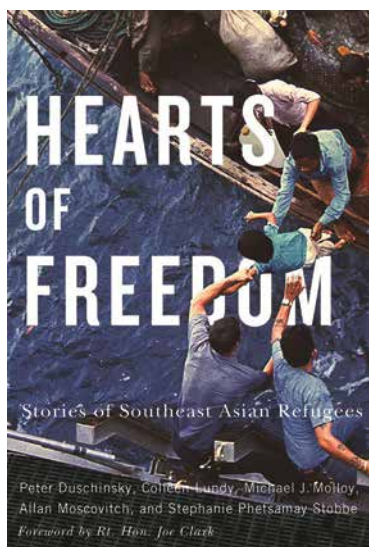
CONGRATULATIONS ON THE WELL-DESERVED recognition. As someone who has written for the magazine, I am basking lightly in the reflected glory of this award.

Yuen Pau Woo
via LinkedIn

WHAT AN HONOUR AND SO VERY WELL DESERVED!

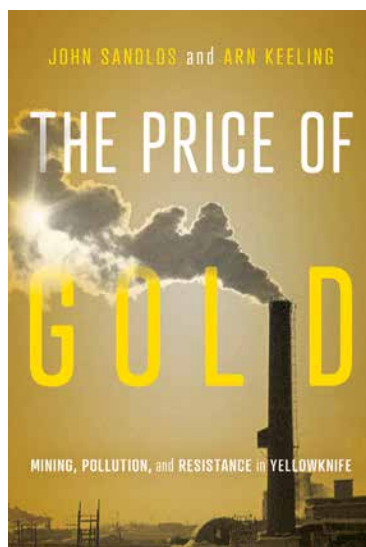
Iwa Fung
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Hearts of Freedom
Stories of Southeast Asian Refugees
**Peter Duschinsky, Colleen Lundy, Michael J. Molloy,
 Allan Moscovitch, and Stephanie Phetsamay Stobbe**

"*Hearts of Freedom* recounts the heroic stories of the boat people in heart-wrenching, unimaginable situations as they searched for freedom. Their testimonies – filled with unreal courage, sacrifice, and tenacity – will never leave you."
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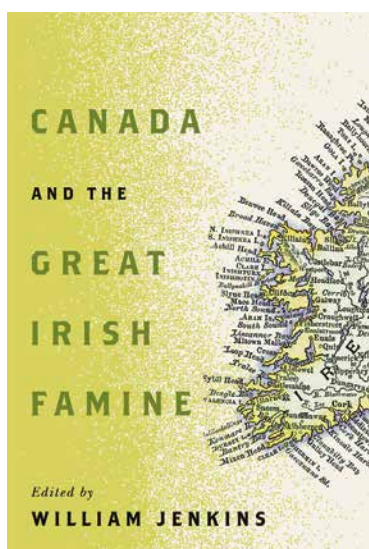
The Price of Gold
Mining, Pollution, and Resistance in Yellowknife
John Sandlos and Arn Keeling

"*The Price of Gold* compels readers to confront the toxic legacies of extraction on Tatsôt'iné territory and the urgent demands of perpetual care. Sandlos and Keeling foreground community resistance and the enduring fight for environmental justice long after the rush is over."
 –Lianne C. Leddy, Wilfrid Laurier University



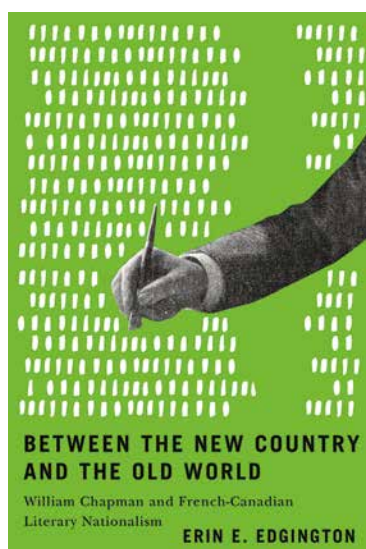
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How Tech Gets Personal
Stephen Monteiro

"An exceptional and timely contribution to media studies. Monteiro redefines the way that we understand the relationship between media and their users."
 –David Parisi, New York University



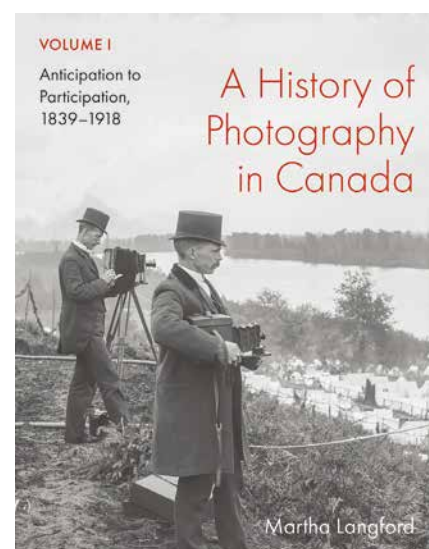
Canada and the Great Irish Famine
 Edited by William Jenkins

"*Canada and the Great Irish Famine* provides a rich and long-overdue reassessment, offering yardsticks with which to measure the Atlantic Canadian and Western experiences."
 –Kevin James, University of Guelph



Between the New Country and the Old World
William Chapman and French-Canadian Literary Nationalism
Erin E. Edgington

"A stimulating work. Edgington writes with a light touch that will attract new readers to Chapman's work and kindle their desire to learn more about him and his period."
 –Patrick Coleman, University of California, Los Angeles



A History of Photography in Canada, Volume One
Anticipation to Participation, 1839–1918
Martha Langford

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 –Elizabeth Edwards, De Montfort University



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Reader's Digest

Everything popular is wrong

James Brooke-Smith

Each of the professions means a prejudice. The necessity for a career forces every one to take sides.

—Oscar Wilde

ON THE FACE OF THINGS, IT WAS a dream assignment. In the fall term, when everyone was still fresh from their summer vacation and filled with that delicious sense of promise that only the start of a new academic year can bring, I would teach an entire course devoted to the life and works of Oscar Wilde. Everything about the prospect appealed to the literary traditionalist in me. All summer I fed upon visions of the return to campus. As my children built castles in the sand, I constructed them in the air: halcyon scenes of a rumpled but kindly professor leading a dozen or so eager undergraduates through Wilde's oeuvre as the mellow autumn light played upon the faux-Doric columns of Varsity Towers. It would be, I told myself, a small but significant victory for learning for its own sake. There would be no self-aggrandizing claims to social relevance, no strained connections to the authorized topics of the day, no uneuphonious references to environmental crisis or social justice. There would be no "learning outcomes" that could be written in a language other than the music of each student's innermost soul.

Like many of my colleagues, I was raised in a school of literary hard knocks. I was taught from an early age to approach literature in a spirit of almost clinical detachment. Works of art were really "texts," and texts were in fact tissues of second-, third-, and fourth-hand discourse, which derived meaning from those vast and abstract systems—history, ideology, language, psychology—that lurk behind the mirage of the author's consciousness. Imaginative enjoyment, aesthetic appreciation, emotional response—seemingly intuitive ways to engage with the material at hand—were relegated to hushed conversations in the corridor before class or the more animated ones that took place in the bar afterwards. When the professor entered the room, we went to work. We always historicized, we brushed each document of civilization against the grain, we decentred the bourgeois subject, we demystified aesthetic ideology, and we thumbed our noses at the intentional fallacy. This is how we acquired the tools with which to pick the locks of each set of heavy iron gates that stood along the steep and winding path to the academy.

The very idea of teaching a course devoted to a single author seems vaguely subversive in the modern university. The assumptions about value and genius that are implied by such an

enterprise are seen as vaguely elitist: antique notions that dead white men once believed in. The main exception, of course, is Shakespeare, but the Bard is a cultural galaxy of such powerful gravity as to be able to warp the fabric of space-time that operates within the field as a whole, so that he can withstand each new wave of decentring and desacralization.

To read Oscar Wilde in the modern university, I reasoned, would be to cultivate a productive form of cognitive dissonance. My aim would be to "magnify the contradictions," as the Maoists used to say. In the one corner, Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, advocate of "art for art's sake," believer in leisure and hedonism as the



Oh, to hear Oscar Wilde's impassioned call.

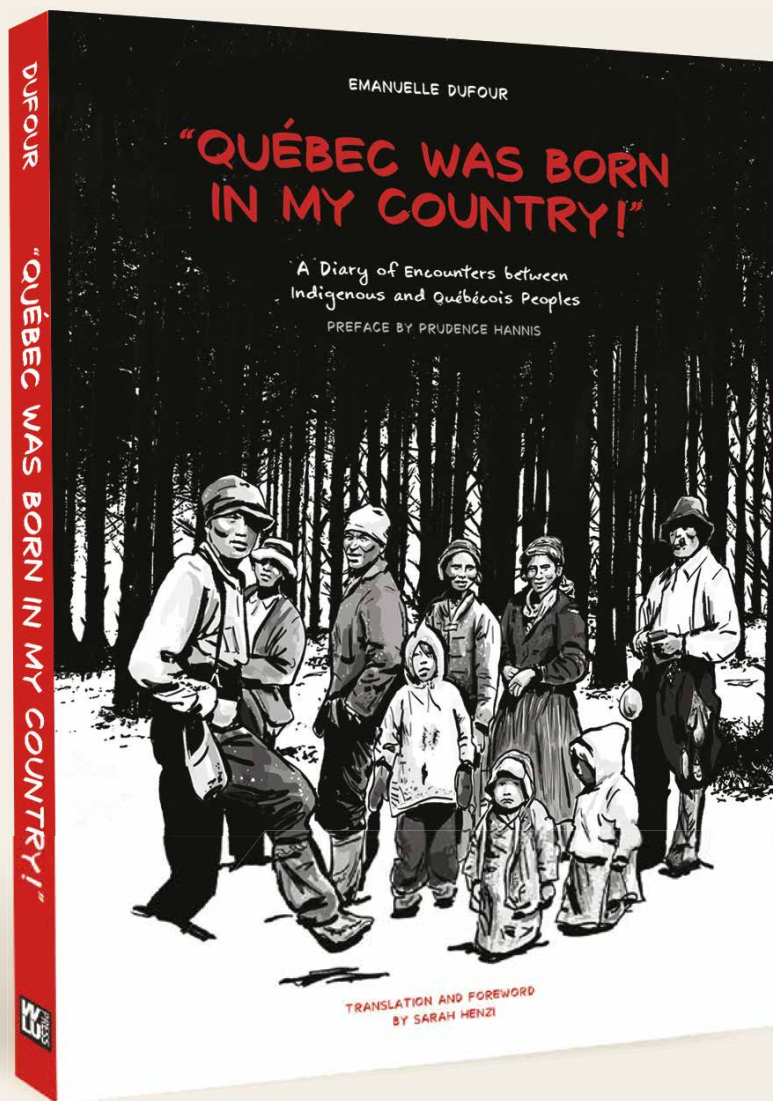
true paths to spiritual wisdom, and an immortal lord of language, whose epigrams and paradoxes will live forever in the annals of literature. And in the other, the pettifogging bureaucrats of modern knowledge production, who treat works of art as occasions for scholastic drudgery and joy-sapping critique, who convert students into walking portfolios of GPAs and human capital, and whose prose is a thick gruel of cliché, jargon, and redundant signposting. Any student who used the arid formula "This essay will argue that..." would receive an instant F in my class.

Yet when that fall finally came around and the mellow light began to play upon those distinctive columns, things did not turn out quite as expected. It was harder than I had imagined

to convert the university seminar room into a zone of pure aesthetic experience—and not only because the moulded plastic furniture and streaky whiteboard were such a far cry from the exquisite interiors in which Dorian Gray and Lord Henry Wotton pursued their musings. The problem went deeper than that. How exactly does one teach aesthetic judgment? What grading scheme does one use for the appreciation of beauty? How does one design an assignment to measure the development of a person's soul? And then there was the problem of aesthetic experience itself—or the fact that aesthetic experience is rarely simply itself, is in fact forever opening out onto other areas of life and other domains of knowledge, prompting questions, inviting analysis, divulging concepts. Art is an occasion for beauty, but it is also always about *something*. And that something—a magical portrait stored in the attic that hides a man's sins, for instance, or a frivolous, self-deceiving individual, who, by a strange twist of fate, happens to have been "earnest" all along—invites us into the murkier realms of morality, politics, justice, and knowledge.

Of course, Wilde knew all of this. No one should take his claims about "art for art's sake" at face value. "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book," he said. "Books are well written, or badly written. That is all." But Wilde's seeming amorality was a provocation against the bourgeois morality of his day. This is why his work appeals so strongly in our own age of neo-Victorian didacticism, in which art is valued for its social message and supposedly offensive books are weeded out of our libraries. Aestheticism was one of the first modern movements that sought to focus the attention of its audience on the disorienting pleasures of the pure form of the artwork—the primal thrill that human beings derive from the act of representation itself rather than from its thematic content. And that pleasure is indeed primal. The thrill that we derive from the very fact that human beings can fashion artifacts in language, paint, or sound that are both part of and separate from the world at large goes all the way back to the figures on the walls of the caves at Lascaux and Chauvet. Those early practitioners called it magic. We call it art. Either way, it seems to be hard-wired into our nature as intelligent creatures.

But, as Wilde also knew, that moment of primal pleasure is all too fleeting. It is a brief pulse of intensity, which, if we wish to prolong our enjoyment, must be embellished with analysis, interpretation, research, discussion, and reasoned argument, indeed with all of the traditional tools of scholarship and criticism that we learn within the academy. For Wilde, art and criticism went hand in hand, were



"QUÉBEC WAS BORN IN MY COUNTRY!"

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY
EMANUELLE DUFOUR

*A Diary of Encounters between
Indigenous and Québécois Peoples*

PREFACE BY PRUDENCE HANNIS

TRANSLATION AND FOREWORD BY SARAH HENZI

In conversation with community members, Elders, spokespeople, students, professionals, and families, Emanuelle Dufour and her co-creators address the settler silence in Québec regarding residential schools and ongoing colonialism, systemic racism, and inadequate curricular material in schools.

equally primal aspects of mankind's nature as an artmaking creature. Analysis need not kill the pleasures of the text; rather, it enhances and extends them.

Perhaps inevitably, then, as the semester progressed, the original dream of pitting Wilde against the university gave way to a less antagonistic vision of Wilde and the university as embodying different facets of the same underlying human capacity. When studied with the kind of sustained care and attention that is really possible only in the seminar room, the brilliant aesthetic surfaces of his texts could be made to fold seamlessly into their seeming opposites: critique, contextualization, scholarship. So, rather than simply bathing in the glow of fleeting moments of aesthetic plenitude, my students and I learned about Wilde's life and times, read some of the ancient and modern classics that influenced his style, studied the transcripts of his two High Court trials and his conviction for gross indecency, pored over contemporary newspaper reports and reviews, traced his legacy in later books and films, and connected his output to the major critical trends of the last half century or so of academic literary studies, from post-colonialism to critical race theory, from deconstruction to the new formalism. All the while, and not just in the corridor before class and at the bar afterwards, we paid close attention to the types and qualities of pleasure that his works stimulated, not because there was a grade for that but because it would have been unnatural to do otherwise.

THE TENSIONS BETWEEN PLEASURE AND JUDGMENT, or between art and scholarship, will be familiar to anyone who has taken English at any point in their school or university careers. As John Guillory points out in *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study*, from 2022, they have been present in a variety of forms throughout the long history of literary criticism—all the way back to classical Greece, where new plays were performed in front of official judges who criticized them before a live audience and right up to our current era of hyperspecialization, hyperprofessionalization, and hyperbureaucratization.

Guillory is the closest thing that literary studies currently has to a superstar, one whose scholarship cuts through from the seminar room to the public mediasphere. *Professing Criticism* achieved the impressive coup of being discussed at length in both the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and the *New York Times*. But it is surely a sign of the times that it is a socio-historical meta-analysis of literary studies and its current travails that makes the news rather than, say, an actual work of literary criticism. If Guillory's book doesn't quite amount to an autopsy, it is nevertheless the kind of complex diagnosis that is offered when the vital signs are weak and the patient requires urgent care.

Professing Criticism is an awesome feat of scholarship, the product of an entire career's worth of reading in the deep history of criticism and an almost Olympian synthesis of its findings into a *ratio studiorum*, or a plan of study for English literature today. It is a rare scholar indeed who can discuss with equal authority Aristotle's *Poetics*, seventeenth-century drama, and the latest debates at the MLA. Despite his enormous erudition, however, Guillory's most brilliant trick is simply to state in the clearest possible terms the



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core activities that constitute the profession. The trick is both simple and brilliant because the rest of us literary scholars seem to have lost sight of these core competencies in the mad dash to keep up with each new critical trend. “We have been living in this institution so long,” he dryly notes, “that we no longer see it.”

At the centre of Guillory’s diagnosis is what the sociologist Max Weber called “professional deformation,” or the way in which our careers can bend us out of shape. This is not just a problem faced by literary scholars but a structural feature of modernity. Today there are no Renaissance men or women. When we become aeronautical engineers or investment portfolio managers or literary critics, we hone some of our human potentials and neglect others. As Guillory puts it, “The most highly specialized, highly skilled forms of cognitive labor entail a correlative disability.” In the case of literary studies, professionalization brings with it enormous benefits but also significant costs. On the positive side of the ledger are job security, social prestige, and a community of fellow practitioners; the intellectual benefits of discussion, debate, and peer review, which, in the ideal case, ensure that new arguments are properly tested and new methods are held up to scrutiny; and, again in the ideal case, protection from the marketplace, where values are determined by the fluctuations of supply and demand rather than as the result of judgment and expertise. On the negative side are the narrowness of specialization, the underdevelopment of alternative competencies and world views, the proliferation of technical jargons and protected fiefdoms, and the peculiar kind of hubris that mistakes expertise in one professional field for privileged knowledge about the world at large.

It is this last deformation — the tendency of literary scholars to mistake their core methods for a master key with which to criticize society as a whole — that has most profoundly bent the profession out of shape. This is the ironic core of Guillory’s argument: as literary studies has gotten smaller over time, both as a narrow academic specialization and as a decreasingly popular major, the claims that it makes about the world have ballooned to comically oversized proportions. These days literary scholars talk less about parataxis and polysyndeton and more about environmental crisis and systemic racism. What started out as a criticism of the text has become a criticism of everything.

Guillory’s historical sociology brings welcome clarity to a series of schisms and controversies that have been bubbling away within literary studies, and to some extent within the culture at large, since the 1960s. The field was transformed in the ‘60s by the social movements of the day, such as the New Left, feminism, Black radicalism, gay liberation, and environmentalism, and by new theoretical approaches derived from Continental philosophy, such as post-structuralism, sociology, psychoanalysis, and cultural studies. These transformations enlivened the discipline enormously. The intellectual thrill of critical theory has acted as a great stimulus to scholarship and a draw for students, especially at the graduate level. Rich fields have been opened up, in particular the study of previously neglected works by women and people of colour. It is entirely appropriate that literary studies should meet the challenge posed by critical theory — that it should interrogate its

central assumptions, analyze its conditions of possibility, subject its most cherished beliefs to scrutiny. Critique is an integral part of the transmission of culture. Without it, culture becomes static and self-satisfied.

But, as Guillory points out, the wider currents of post-’60s critique have also led to some perverse consequences that leave literary criticism ill equipped to defend itself in today’s more hostile environment. The first was the refocusing of radical politics on the discipline itself. As the social movements of the ‘60s petered out in the political retrenchments of the ‘70s and ‘80s, the radical professoriate increasingly took the institution of literary studies itself as the object of critique. It was from this impulse that the “canon wars” of the ‘80s and ‘90s and the “decolonize the curriculum” movement of more recent times emerged. Struggles over the political representation of minority groups were transposed onto the terrain of literary history via the surrogates of the canon and the curriculum.

The other key development was the increasing demand for “topicality”: the tendency of professors to pluck their research topics from the headlines of the liberal press. Hence the now common course formula of “Literature and...,” into which teachers may insert whatever contemporary issue they are most passionate about or that seems most “relevant” to the lives of their students. It will come as no surprise that classes in literature and gender, literature and race, and literature and the environment are more common than, say, literature and macroeconomics or literature and theology, both equally pressing matters of concern. Again, the urge to topicality skews the original aims and objects of the discipline: texts become occasions for political debate (or, worse still, political preaching) rather than works of art in their own right. Literary history is foreshortened and books that fail to echo the political sentiments of the present are discarded or traduced. As Guillory archly points out, in certain quarters whole swaths of literary production have come to be seen not as objects of scholarship, let alone occasions for appreciation and enjoyment, but rather as obstacles to the wider political aims of the professoriate.

Some have objected to Guillory’s delivery of such a lengthy internal critique of literary studies at a time when the discipline faces so many threats from outside. English departments in Canada and throughout the anglophone world are in poor health, certainly in comparison with how they were faring before the 2008 financial crisis. Surely the overblown rhetoric of some critics is a minor irritant — and par for the course in any field — compared with the threats posed by declining enrolments, frozen hiring budgets, rising tuition costs, economic inequality, the increasingly desperate scramble to find good professional jobs after graduation, the coming disruptions of artificial intelligence, and the willful philistinism, if not outright hostility, of the administrators and politicians who hold the purse strings. The critic Jonathan Kramnick has described this upheaval as a potential “extinction event in the history of knowledge,” as an entire generation of scholars retire without replacement and whole branches of the curriculum are left to wither and die. This crisis of replication is seen not just in literary studies; it applies to varying degrees across the whole of the humanities curriculum, from history to philosophy, from languages to religion.

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As if these challenges were not severe enough, literary scholars must also reckon with the diminished status of literature itself in the wider cultural ecosystem. It can often seem these days as though we are teaching literature in an incipiently post-literate society. When literary studies was one of the most popular majors in a postwar university system flush with public funds and swollen with the baby boom generation, books enjoyed both cultural prestige and popular appeal. To take just one example, in 1964 Saul Bellow's novel *Herzog*, unmistakably a serious work of art in the English language, sold 142,000 copies in hardcover in the United States. An equivalent novel today would be considered a success at 10 percent of that figure. Back then, the printed word had not yet been displaced by television, let alone the internet, social media, and the smartphone, as the dominant medium of entertainment and enlightenment. The prestige conveyed by a degree in English literature could also be converted relatively easily into the more tangible rewards of paid employment in the middle-class professions, even if a detailed knowledge of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* did not directly aid in the completion of one's daily tasks. These two structural supports—literature's relative popularity and the cultural capital conferred by its study—have been severely weakened in the last thirty years or so. Literature is a minor cultural form in the digital era, and the tech billionaires who have built the new economy simply don't trade in our currency.

In the spirit of realism and modesty with which he approaches his topic, Guillory offers no sweeping program of reforms and no grand

designs for the salvation of the discipline. Instead he counsels a "reestablishment" of literary studies around its core competencies and objects of knowledge: that is, the interpretative analysis of works of art in English over the course of its long history from its emergence as a vernacular literary language in the medieval period to the current era of global English. As he notes, this program avoids the "overestimation" of the socially transformative effects of analyzing texts, but he nevertheless insists that the study of literature is an authentic part of human knowledge. Any university worth its salt should be committed to preserving and expanding that knowledge.

The scholar Simon During recently courted controversy when he grouped Guillory's work alongside that of Kramnick, Rita Felski, and Michael Clune, who have offered their own visions for how English literature might avoid disciplinary overreach and rediscover its core competencies, as part of a new "conservative" movement within the field. The utterance of such an epithet in tones other than those of severe disapprobation is vanishingly rare in literary circles. This was bold talk indeed, even if During did make it amply clear that the conservatism he was describing was an internal stance in relation to literary studies, rather than a matter of party politics. Indeed, in his reckoning, the conservative program for refocusing literature on its proper domain of expertise comports with a wider left-wing politics that seeks to protect knowledge and culture from the depredations of market fundamentalism and authoritarian populism.

I suspect that many of my colleagues would still balk at the term, in spite of During's careful delimitations, not least because the values

of gradual change and presumptive trust in tradition that he evokes, and that were once part of a mainstream ideology, have long since been supplanted by the stew of far-right insurrectionism and cultural grievance that passes for conservatism today. Perhaps a more appealing term around which the field might rally is "conservationist," which strikes me as a more realistic goal of the business of literary studies in the era of shrinking departments, strained literacy, and sweeping techno-revolution. We are keen to conserve natural ecosystems, so why not cultural ecosystems as well? Progressives gladly endorse the conservation of natural habitats and dwindling biodiversity. Why not add Milton and Spenser to the endangered species list? After all, conservation is not simply a matter of suppressing change or preserving our objects of concern in aspic. Conservationists rely on the latest scientific knowledge and produce new insights into the species they conserve, but they do so only insofar as those insights and innovations ensure the continued flourishing of the organisms they seek to protect. At the heart of conservationism are judgments of value. We should conserve literature, just as we should conserve the biosphere, because of its inherent value, in this case as a part of human knowledge.

♦

OSCAR WILDE NARROWLY AVOIDED BECOMING AN academic. He was a brilliant but wayward student who was suspended from his Oxford college after returning late for the start of term from a tour of Italy and Greece—which he quipped was "quite as good as going to lectures"—but still managed to graduate with a first-class degree and the prestigious Newdigate Prize for poetry.

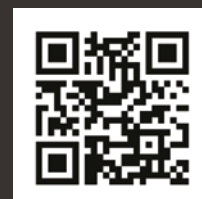
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He then studied for a junior fellowship, the first rung on the ladder to an academic career, but was not awarded the position. Scholarship's loss was literature's gain. After briefly toying with the idea of becoming a school inspector, Wilde made his way to London in search of "success: fame or even notoriety." It is curious to think that in an alternative universe, Wilde would have missed his calling as a writer and lived out his days as a provincial administrator, ensuring that pupils followed the prescribed curriculum in classics and English, science and mathematics.

In London, Wilde made a minor name for himself as one of the louche young men who hung around at fashionable gallery openings and as the author of a poorly received book of poems, which the critic Edmund Gosse referred to as "a curious toadstool, a malodorous parasitic growth." His big break came with his 1882 lecture tour of Canada and America, during which he travelled to such cultural hot spots as Moncton, New Brunswick, Macon, Georgia, and Stockton, California, delivering more than a hundred talks with titles such as "The English Renaissance" and "The Decorative Arts." The tour was carefully stage-managed by Wilde's agent, William Francis Morse, in order to cash in on the popularity of Gilbert and Sullivan's aesthete-satirizing comic opera *Patience*, which was touring North America at the time, as well as on Wilde's own celebrity as an exotic creature from the British art world. This was a far cry from the rarefied society of Magdalen College. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, Wilde's lecture was interrupted by rowdy Harvard undergraduates who parodied the speaker's outlandish dress and posture; in Leadville, Colorado, he was given a tour of the famous Matchless silver mine by a group of workers inspired by his message that art and beauty should be made available to the common man. They named a new shaft the Oscar in his honour.

It would be wrong to see Wilde's North American tour — and his subsequent career as a magazine editor, essayist, author, and media personality — as a clean break with his abortive academic career, however. While on tour, Wilde handed out visiting cards with the self-awarded title "Professor of Aesthetics." In spite of the air of Barnum and Bailey about the whole enterprise — Barnum himself actually invited Wilde to appear in the ring alongside Jumbo the elephant, a PR opportunity that the aspiring author wisely declined — the lectures themselves were serious disquisitions on art history and the ennobling effects of aesthetic experience. There was an idealistic mission lurking behind the comic theatricality that was drawn directly from the classical humanities curriculum that Wilde had absorbed at university. This is what the critic Linda Dowling called "aesthetic democracy," a belief that the fruits of humanistic learning should be available to all members of a civilized modern society.

It was a similarly idealistic vision that Wilde outlined in *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, his idiosyncratic defence of libertarian socialism and, for much of the twentieth century, his most frequently translated work, a rare instance of an English text made available in Mandarin, Yiddish, and Faroese. In it, Wilde imagined a utopian world in which all productive labour is fully mechanized so that each member of society can enjoy complete leisure and total freedom. (Perhaps someone should hand out copies

before the next shareholders' meetings of Nvidia and Palantir.) The proper goal of socialism, he argued, was not the formation of "Industrial Tyrannies" controlled by party or state, nor a kind of universal philanthropy that would simply replicate the relations of hierarchy and dependence that characterize capitalist society, but a new age of individualism, in which each human being would have the freedom to cultivate their innermost potentials to the furthest possible extent. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the man in the green velvet breeches and flowing cape argued that the point of socialism was to free us from the "sordid necessity of living for others."

The problem, however, is that human beings are notoriously bad at dealing with the qualified freedoms and partial leisure available in our current societies, let alone the full-fat versions that would be on offer in a fully automated socialist utopia. Given a spare couple of hours, most of us barely know what to do with ourselves. Instead of seeking "joy and beauty," we doom-scroll on our phones or slump on the couch in front of Netflix. This is why Wilde defines the highest goal of human existence as "cultivated leisure" rather than, say, pure freedom or the fulfillment of our wildest desires. It is no accident that the Greek term *scholē*, from which we derive our words "school" and "scholar," refers both to "idleness" and to "learning." The pursuit of wisdom requires leisure; and insofar as human beings can achieve anything approaching wisdom, it discloses leisure as the proper end of human existence. Or, to put it slightly differently, utopia is a school, and vice versa.

As Wilde pointed out, few societies in history have granted genuine leisure and freedom to anyone other than a tiny class of privileged

men — emperors, kings, aristocrats, and a handful of rebel artists, such as Wilde's Romantic heroes, Shelley and Byron — and only then in the context of wider social relations of exploitation and oppression. Even fewer have truly valued joy and beauty above the worldly pursuits of status and wealth, desire and satisfaction. It is all too easy in our contemporary age of hypercritique to dismiss Wilde as a privileged fop and the gospel of "art for art's sake" as a smokescreen for ideology. But both during his circus-like lecture tour and in his brilliant essays, Wilde argued that cultivated leisure should be the right of the many, not the privilege of the few. His carefully constructed persona as an aristocratic dandy-aesthete was not a gesture of elitist hauteur but a kind of prefiguration of the better future he hoped to bring into existence for everyone.

So, as another academic year rolls around and we make our way back to Varsity Towers, I would like to urge everyone — professors and students, deans and administrators, first-generation students and the scions of the managerial elite — to focus their attention on the utopia of idleness and wisdom that hovers just out of sight behind the professional deformations and bureaucratic perversities of the modern academy. When you do so, you might also contemplate enrolling in a class in one of the core disciplines of the humanities program, such as philosophy, history, or literature — what we might call the PHIL subjects, the ones you do out of love, not duty, and the ones in which you remain an amateur even when masquerading as an expert. These are both some of the oldest forms of human knowledge and some of the few majors where we prepare for a better future by learning how to spend our leisure hours wisely. ▲

Theories of Light

*When the moon appeared it was a silver blade
so thin I thought a god had closed her eye.*
— Patrick Lane

Is it time, then, to say good night? In the dark, I watched the white
saguaro flowers open. Their glow, starlight, reflected in your face.

So many years we have theorized. Are there tasks that never get old?
Small children everywhere recite the names of planets, those ancient gods.

If light were corpuscular. If light behaves as a series of waves. In the heat
of the desert, mirages wet our thirsty eyes. If our eyes could drink. If our eyes
could quench our thirst. Your gaze cannot penetrate this wall, though
I can hear your voice. Is there a god of electromagnetic waves?

No longer children, who shall we invoke? The moon cannot make its own light.
The owl's eyeshine: planets in the night. If light were made of living cells.

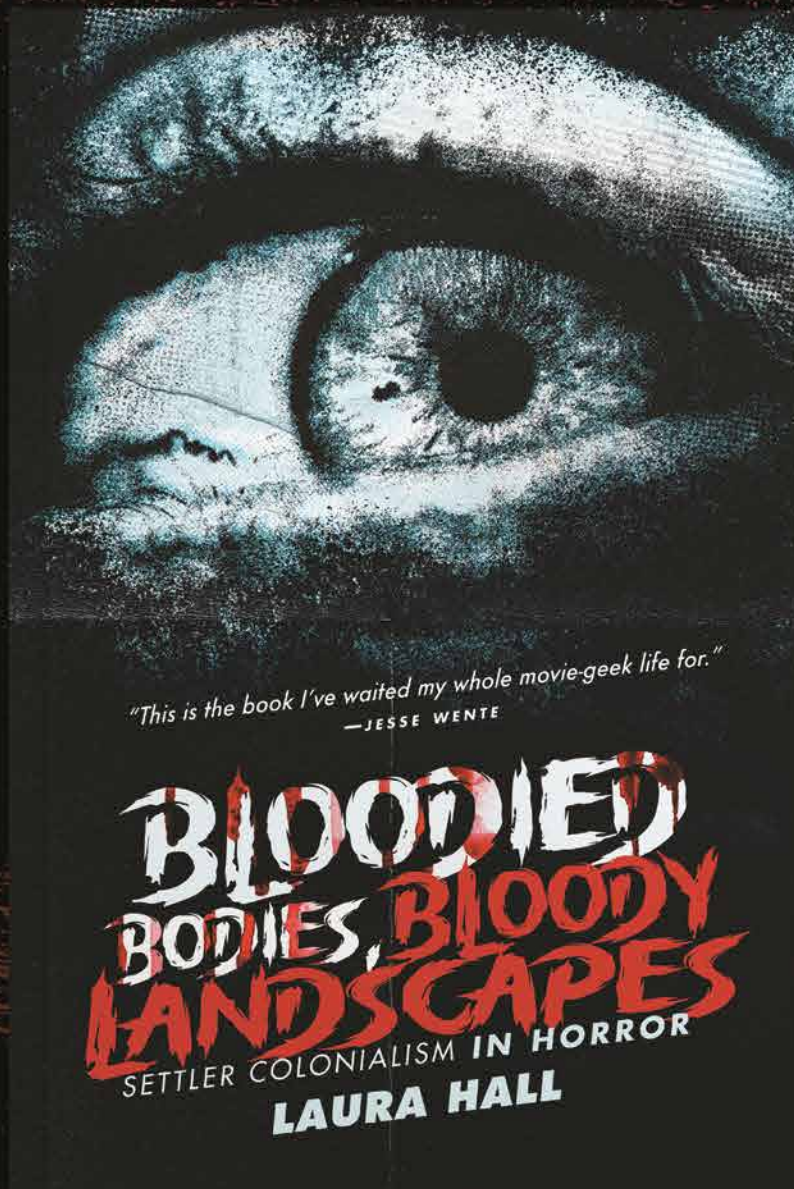
Some questions even stars cannot answer. When you were lost
I searched for you by the fleeting brilliance of lightning flashes.

What can I, whose name means love, say to you, my love? Do the gods
sleep, or merely close their eyes? Light, now: energy, quantized.

Sneha Madhavan-Reese

Sneha Madhavan-Reese is the author of Observing the Moon and Elementary Particles.

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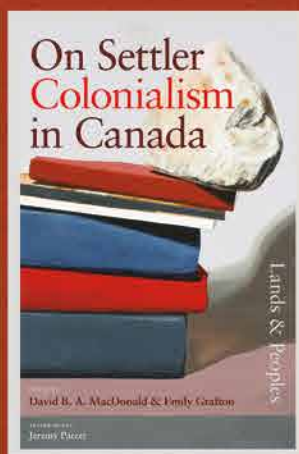
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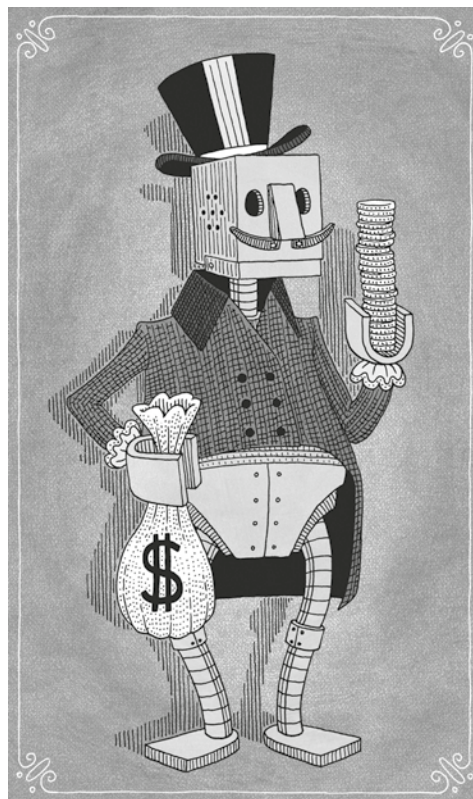
IN *HAYEK'S BASTARDS*, QUINN SLOBODIAN, a Canadian professor of international history at Boston University, examines strange bedfellows of the alt-right: extreme free marketers, libertarians, paleolibertarians, and anarcho-capitalists. This is his third book tracing the intellectual legacies — both faithful and unfaithful — of the great economists Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises, who have become the patron saints of neo-liberals and adherents of what's known as the Austrian School. Inevitably, many now subscribe to ideas that their patron saints would not recognize or embrace, which is why Slobodian coins the term "Hayek's Bastards" (with a nod to John Ralston Saul's *Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West*, from 1992).

The protagonists in Slobodian's *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, which won the George Louis Beer Prize in 2019, were pretty classic neo-liberals, fairly close to Mises and especially to Hayek. As ardent free marketers, they opposed economic nationalism and, in the 1940s, managed to defeat a United Nations proposal, the International Trade Organization, which they considered too permissive of national protectionism. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, with stricter controls on national policies, was created instead. Subsequently these actors supported the European Common Market and called for top-down networks of international rules to protect markets from democratic majorities.

In *Crack-Up Capitalism: Market Radicals and a Dream of a World without Democracy*, his 2023 book, Slobodian again depicted neo-liberals seeking to safeguard markets from democracy and the state, but with a more bottom-up approach, including special economic zones, where trade is largely free and protected from misguided majorities. Such a zone might take the form of a large city (Hong Kong), a principality (Liechtenstein), or a special real estate development (Canary Wharf in London). The Protect Ontario by Unleashing Our Economy Act, which Doug Ford's Progressive Conservatives passed earlier this year, could create new examples in Canada. Slobodian's "crack-up" capitalists also included libertarians who *really* want to escape — all the way to ungoverned free market communities in outer space or on floating "seasteads."

Now Slobodian has shifted his focus to factions on the alt-right. He argues that we "cannot understand the peculiar hybrids of extreme market ideology, Far Right authoritarianism, and social conservatism without familiarizing ourselves with the often-tangled genealogies traced in this book."

Starting in the 1990s, Slobodian explains, some neo-liberals drew elements of cognitive and evolutionary psychology, genetics, and biological anthropology, along with economic neo-liberalism, into a "new fusionism": a scientized view of how societies and economies function. It involves a "turn to nature" for a broader view of the cultural and often racial prerequisites for



Scrooge McDuck meets Friedrich Hayek.

a functioning market society, which Slobodian considers a mutant strain of neo-liberalism, not a rejection of it — though the advocates of the new fusionism often distort the thinking of the masters. Hayek saw the "competitive selection of cultural institutions" across societies as important for establishing free markets (with an advantage to the Christian West), but he eschewed genetic explanations. Mises, for his part, flirted explicitly with racial theories, so he is more often invoked by these new fusionists.

Slobodian understands "the most radical strain of the new fusionism" as based on what he calls "the rock of biology," and he gives the impression that the new populist right has

embraced "three hard": hard-wired human nature, hard borders, and hard money.

Extreme-right racism is long established, but it acquired a "scientific" hue starting in the 1970s. Charles Koch, the American libertarian billionaire and funder of many right-wing causes (including Canada's Fraser Institute), supported a new Institute for Humane Studies, which promoted work on "human differentiation," including genetic differences between racial groups that it suggested may have evolved over centuries. This thinking contested the more prevalent liberal view that race and gender differences are shaped more by social forces than by biology. The American paleoconservative and presidential hopeful Pat Buchanan, who combined libertarianism with prejudice, became an early champion of such views. At the beginning of his second campaign for the White House, in February 1995, Buchanan's adviser Murray Rothbard emphasized a "revolution of white Euro-males" and pushed messaging about "immigration by hordes of foreigners."

A prominent actor in the Mises camp has been the white nationalist Peter Brimelow, a British journalist who in the 1970s lived in Canada, where he fiercely criticized multiculturalism. After moving to the United States, he advocated theories of genetic hierarchies and a racialized free market liberalism — free for goods and capital, not for labour. He even proposed, in his book *Alien Nation*, a ban on immigrants who were not white Anglo-Saxons, because the U.S. was becoming "a freak among the world's nations" due to "the unprecedented demographic mutation it is inflicting on itself." Racial differences, his reasoning went, require hard borders to protect the gene pool.

Such thinking got a huge boost in 1994 from Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve*, which Slobodian considers "the most controversial book of the decade." Herrnstein and Murray emphasized IQ differences among groups and argued that, according to one critique, "the more open the society becomes, the more it becomes a closed caste system," because populations are inevitably sorted based on cognitive abilities. They worried that well-educated people with high IQs were having few children, while welfare recipients with low IQs, encouraged by social assistance, were having many. Although Herrnstein and Murray did not focus primarily on race, they did posit that average IQs varied accordingly, with Black intelligence being generally lower than white intelligence. Moreover, they argued that Black and white individuals with the same IQs had similar earnings. Herrnstein and Murray concluded, therefore, that state action to end inequality was futile. *The Bell Curve*

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days of quiet
surrender the deer
tucked deep in the valley
licked by autumn
glaze light of
horned lark from
white birch quickest
bloom of beauty
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Josiah Nelson

Josiah Nelson teaches creative writing at the University of Saskatchewan.

was roundly criticized on statistical and other grounds, but it shifted the debate and certainly influenced thinking on the right. Murray, a long-time scholar with the American Enterprise Institute, continued attacking the welfare state in *Human Diversity*, from 2020.

Many of Silicon Valley's libertarians have bought into neo-geneticism. Elon Musk, for example, has made reproducing his genius a personal project, with at least fourteen children by four different women. Such libertarians

are hostile not only to the welfare state but also to diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. "DEI will never *d-i-e* from words alone," the tech billionaire Peter Thiel, a mentor to J.D. Vance, has written. "We need the sticks and stones of government violence to exorcise the diversity demon." Thiel, who is at the centre of many alt-right activities, also admires Curtis Yarvin — or Mencius Moldbug — an influential neo-reactionary theorist of the so-called Dark Enlightenment.

In his discussion of "hard money," Slobodian describes right-wing neo-liberals, such as the former U.S. congressman and presidential candidate Ron Paul, as "goldbugs," who claim to be the heirs of Mises. They reject even Milton Friedman's prescriptions for monetary management and advocate a return to gold and other precious metals. Many of them foresee a coming economic apocalypse and a world state led by "Trilateralists" and globalists. In the predicted chaos, racial hatred will grow as Black welfare recipients are cut off. Here, however, Slobodian exaggerates. While there are certainly advocates of hard money who are new fusionists, it is possible to favour hard money but not hard borders. It's even possible to believe in hard-wired human nature while rejecting hard borders.

Slobodian also fails to draw out the full significance of the new fusionists for contemporary politics. He suggests that the Alternative for Germany party has intellectual links to the anarcho-capitalists Murray Rothbard and Hans-Hermann Hoppe (author of *Democracy: The God That Failed*) and to Mises, but he doesn't develop a complete portrait of them as new fusionists. Slobodian offers passing reference to such politicians as Argentina's Javier Milei and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, who seem to be closer to his anarcho-capitalist subset, but he says little about France's Marine Le Pen and nothing about Italy's Giorgia Meloni or Hungary's Viktor Orbán, all right-wing authoritarians who don't seem to fit the new-fusionist category.

Many of Slobodian's protagonists, whom he calls false prophets, are fringe characters, even in conservative circles, and not all are actually new fusionists. While he says understanding their intellectual trajectories is essential for understanding far-right authoritarians and extreme free marketers, he seems focused

on a subset of a subset — just one part of the larger, mixed group.

Indeed, many far-right and free market figures are quite smart. Often they write books and scholarly articles, reside in academia (George Mason University and the Claremont Colleges are hot spots), and associate with foundations, institutions, and societies (including the American Enterprise Institute, the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, and the Federalist Society). And, of course, Silicon Valley has spawned countless staunch libertarians, who have little in common with right-wing Catholic thinkers. In other words, the far right has many factions and disagreements. While the larger motley group generally supports Donald Trump and the Republican Party, the commingling of deeply anti-intellectual populists in the MAGA movement with contending schools of far-right ideologues can be uncomfortable.

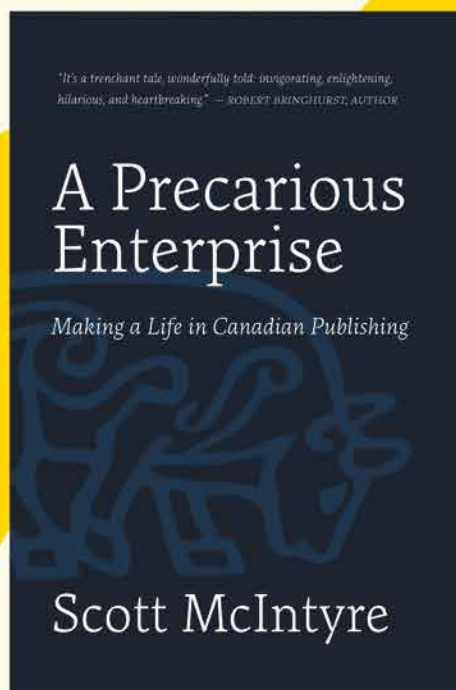
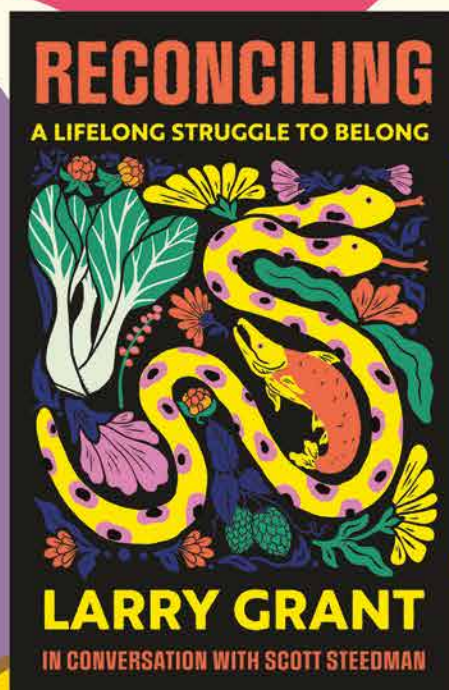
Trump's current entourage includes a wide variety of hard right wingers. Few qualify as new fusionists — usually because they're not goldbugs — though most believe in hard-wired human nature and hard borders. They're deeply divided on classic economic liberalism — and especially on Trump's love of tariffs. Perhaps the president's most interesting and dangerous courtier is Vance, his savvy vice-president, whose influences range from Thiel to conservative Catholic legal theory, as propounded by Harvard's Adrian Vermuele, and the anti-constitutionalism of the German political theorist Carl Schmitt.

Slobodian makes several references to the European alt-right but none to a parallel entity in Canada, perhaps because it scarcely exists, at least in intellectual circles comparable to those elsewhere. Prominent alt-right thinkers in Canada are virtually non-existent. There are no notable new fusionists, and extreme libertarians are rare. The Conservative Party has populist tendencies and rails against big government, but it's not racist, anti-immigration, or enamoured of gold. Canada has nasty right-wing populists, some of whom were in the Freedom Convoy and at the standoff near Coutts, Alberta, as well as skinhead or neo-fascist outfits such as the Hammerskin Nation. But they seem few and decidedly on the outside. We can be thankful for that. ▲

A personal and historical story of identity, place, and belonging from a Musqueam-Chinese Elder caught between cultures

"Larry Grant's life is a model of what it means to rise above hardship, transcend preconceived notions, and live life in a good way. I've had the honour of meeting him, but this book makes me feel as if I know him. And that is a profound gift."

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— Robert Bringhurst, poet and author



Hello!

Don Gillmor wants us to wake up

Ron Verzuh

On Oil**Don Gillmor**

Biblioasis

144 pages, softcover and ebook

LONG BEFORE JED CLAMPETT DISCOVERED “a bubblin’ crude” on *The Beverly Hillbillies*, the world was captivated by oil. Or, as the journalist, novelist, and historian Don Gillmor recounts in *On Oil*, captivated by a dream of riches that is leading us down a disastrous path. Since the first rig was built in 1847, in Azerbaijan, oil and gas have seeped into our everyday existence, creating symbols of false pride and the illusory hope that somehow pumping black gold can foster a better way of life.

In his slim but important book, Gillmor exposes the many myths of a multi-billion-dollar industry while also pointing fingers at those who have become phony King Midases, complicit with an array of dictators ruling the world’s petrostates. They have done so while promoting their quest as God’s work. Oilmen, Gillmor notes, display a “strong streak of evangelism.”

Fittingly, then, Gillmor turns to Biblical references throughout. Near the end, he quotes the Book of Revelation: “A third of the earth was burnt up, and a third of the trees were burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up.” He continues spelling out the destruction by paraphrasing St. John the Evangelist: “A third of the sea becomes blood, a third of the creatures in the sea die, smoke covers the earth, and out of the smoke come locusts. A great beast arises from the sea and deceives the world.” In today’s context, the beast is clearly the Trump administration, accompanied by the industry’s “believers, blasphemers, and penitents, each with their own convictions and statistics.”

“Oil has won wars, started others, been a force for nationalism and colonization, and provided a stubborn mythology,” Gillmor writes of the “one true global religion.” Invoking the spirit of Rachel Carson’s classic *Silent Spring*, he emphasizes that oil is more a “weapon of mass destruction” than a path to salvation. In doing so, Gillmor joins the ranks of American muckrakers who have shown oil’s potential for harm. In 1904, Ida Tarbell dealt a blow to the powerful monopoly built by John D. Rockefeller with *The History of the Standard Oil Company*, collecting a series of articles in *McClure’s* magazine. Later, Upton Sinclair drew public attention to industry wrongdoings with his novel *Oil!*, which was made into the film *There Will Be Blood*. Unlike those two, Gillmor spent time getting his hands dirty before he became a writer. He recalls his own youthful experience as a roughneck in

Alberta, where the environment and Indigenous communities have been devastated through the costly extraction of bitumen. In referencing the Lodgepole blow-in, which in 1982 spewed 200 million cubic feet of noxious hydrogen sulphide per day for more than two months, Gillmor describes the “essential duality” of the province’s petroleum industry as “at once economic engine and destroyer of worlds.”

The oilsands represent the front line of “a war fought with science, celebrity, misinformation, and political cudgels,” and Alberta politicians have persistently paved the way. Premier Ernest Manning led the charge from the 1940s to the 1960s. Also a radio preacher, he called



Tapping into the dominance of big oil.

oil “the lamp of God’s Word.” He was followed in the 1990s by the “Useful Idiot” Ralph Klein. Most recently, Danielle Smith, the oil company employee turned premier, has become the industry’s “Happy Warrior.” The “political capitalism” of such figures, Gillmor writes, has energized lobbyists to seize power and to craft public policy favourable to their clients.

At times, *On Oil* reads like a doomsday scenario. Based on well-researched facts, however, this is no conspiracy theory tract. The bad guys really are bad, and they don’t care what happens to local communities or whole countries. Gillmor details several instances of big oil’s capacity for corruption and how all of us have been “cursed by oil’s ease, seduced by its possibilities.”

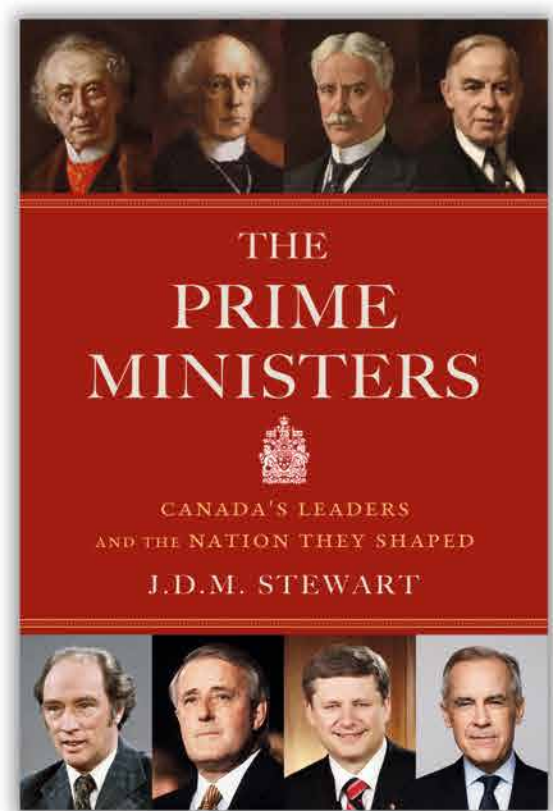
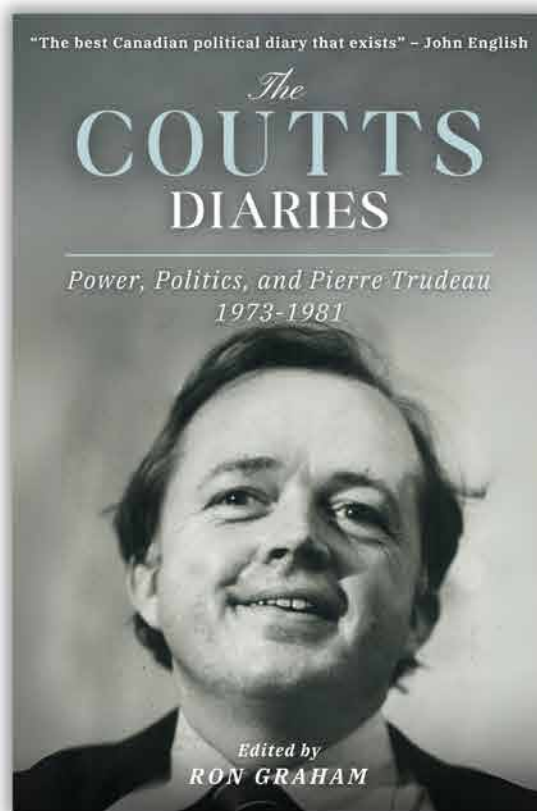
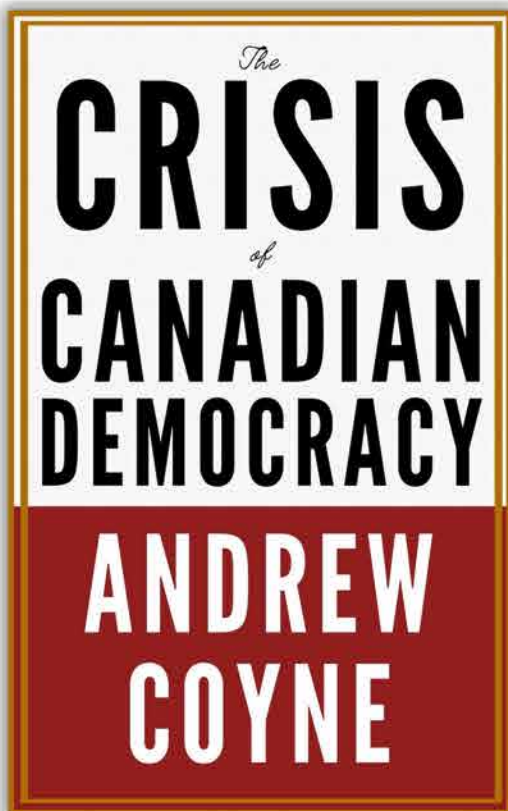
Equatorial Guinea, a former Spanish colony on the west coast of Central Africa, offers one stark example. When reserves were discovered there in 1995, the dictatorial president, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, opened the doors to big oil. He eventually pocketed \$700 million in royalties while the poverty-ridden masses went without drinkable water, proper housing, or health care. Nigeria, the world’s sixth-most-populous country, is another example, suffering from what Gillmor calls “the resource curse.” Before the discovery of oil in 1956, “Nigeria had a robust and diversified economy.” By putting all its eggs in the petroleum basket, the government left other industries to wither. Oil became king, with 85 percent of the wealth going to 1 percent of the population. Today Nigerian leaders consider the development of renewable clean energy to be impossible. And then there’s Saudi Arabia, which has been pumping oil since 1938 but, as Gillmor shows, is at least aware that it must develop renewable energy sources for when the wells inevitably run dry.

What the *New York Times* has called “the money-losing boondoggle” of fracking natural gas is also a problem. The process may be “wildly unprofitable” and destructive, but that didn’t stop the United States from becoming the world’s largest gas producer by 2015. Gillmor notes a Harvard University study that found those living near fracking sites “showed a 3.5 percent increase in premature death,” while other researchers have found a corresponding “prevalence of asthma, cardiology issues, and low birth weights.”

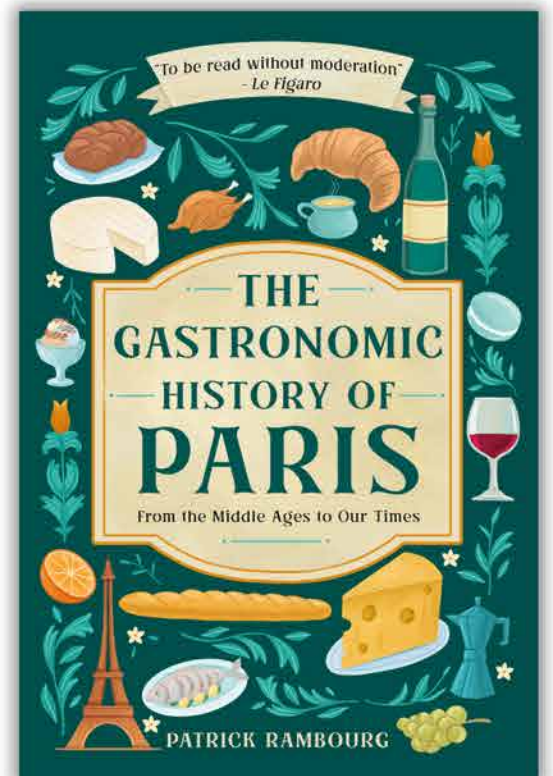
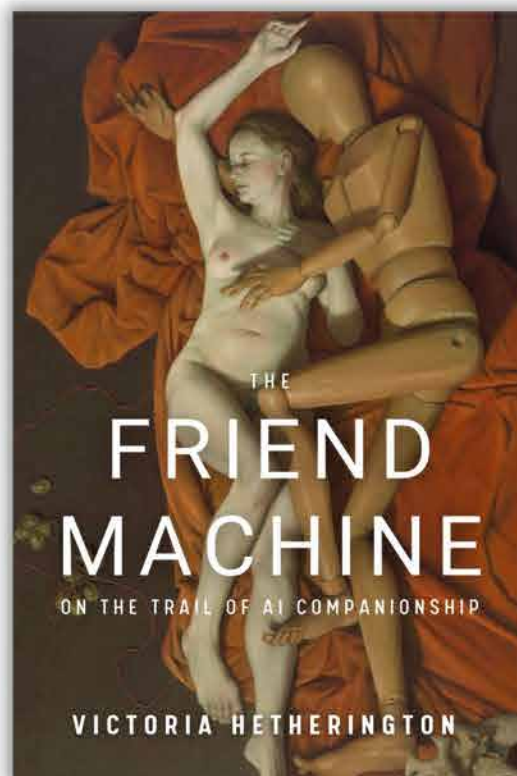
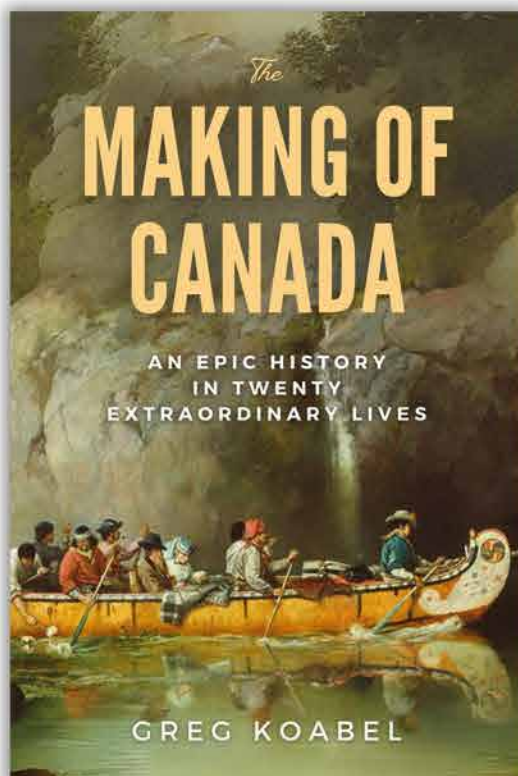
Nine years ago, with *Strangers in Their Own Land*, the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild detailed the fracking nightmare in Louisiana, where the oil and chemical industry has created a toxic backyard. Gillmor paints an equally grim picture of Pennsylvania, where residents have discovered they can sometimes light their drinking water on fire after fracking has arrived. “We are hard-wired to ignore climate change,” Gillmor states, adding later that “we have become inured to environmental outrages.” Yet it is difficult not to feel deepening anger after reading this strong indictment of the most earth-destroying economic force that exists today. Oil may be the silent enemy of the people, asserts Gillmor, “yet there is hope.”

Despite what seems to be the unstoppable destruction of Donald Trump’s “drill, baby, drill” doctrine, *On Oil* ultimately presents the case for a renewable future. Even now, renewable energy is “cheaper than fossil fuels.” And Alberta and Texas, bucking stereotypes, lead their countries in its production. Ironically, perhaps big oil’s never-ending quest for bigger profits will assist the world’s quest for survival. ▲

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Some finer points on place names and commemorations

Daniel Woolf

The web of our life is a mingled yarn, good and ill together.

—William Shakespeare

ON VISITING MY HOME CITY OF Winnipeg for the first time since before the pandemic, I noticed that a major road, Bishop Grandin Boulevard, no longer exists. Or rather it exists but has a different name: Abinojii Mikanah, which is Anishinaabemowin for “the children’s way.” The boulevard, along with a couple of smaller thoroughfares, was renamed by the city council in 2024 after consultation with Indigenous groups. The grounds for renaming are that Vital-Justin Grandin, who died in 1902, was a proponent of residential schools and has joined others, previously celebrated, in posthumous infamy.

I have no special affection for Grandin’s memory nor even an informed opinion on the justness of his demotion. Growing up in the anglophone half of Winnipeg, I’d never heard of the prelate, and his eponymous boulevard only came into existence after I left the city for good in the mid-1970s. But the change occasioned for me some further reflection on the politics of historical naming, unnamings, and renaming, about which there has been much heat in Canada and internationally for well over a decade. There’s a good deal of academic literature on the subject of honorific place names, as well as monuments and memorials: who gets one, who should lose theirs, and so on. These are questions that I think about frequently as a scholar who mainly writes about attitudes to and perceptions of the past; for several years, I have taught graduate and undergraduate courses in which I ask students to wrestle with this topic and other matters of historically related controversy.

In *When Heroes Become Villains*, one of the final titles to be published by New Star Books, Jon Bartlett and Brian Robertson devote successive chapters to three British Columbians: Joseph William Trutch, John Sebastian Helmcken, and William Bowser. Bartlett and Robertson leave their readers in little doubt of their view that the sins of these West Coast politicians, respectively a chief commissioner of lands and works (and eventually lieutenant-governor), a pre-Confederation physician (and speaker of the House of Assembly), and an attorney general (and briefly premier), merit their dissociation from various landmarks and streets. Helmcken scores highest on the villainy scale, having, in the authors’ view, responsibility for a smallpox epidemic that ravaged Indigenous communities, “the worst single act of genocide



A metaphorical — but also literal — beheading of Egerton Ryerson on June 6, 2021.

in the history of the Americas.” (Those are powerful words: the decimation of several other Indigenous populations might lay equal claim to that awful trophy.)

While I am glad to be enlightened on the mixed record of the book’s three subjects, I remain, as with Grandin, agnostic on these individual cases. To the authors’ credit, they include a concluding discussion of factors to be considered in unnamings, suggesting that agency in such matters belongs to the jurisdiction, usually municipal, in which the controversial landmarks exist; and they concede that tactics such as mounting educational plaques can offer an acceptable substitute for the outright removal of names or illegal destruction of property.

Universities, as much as cities, are cauldrons of such controversy, places in which ideas and debates flourish (or should) and where passions run high. Compared with American campuses, Canadian schools have allowed for greater representation from faculty and student groups in adjudicating name changes, and this approach has occasioned the championing of more inclusive policies that better reflect both the diversity of contemporary academic communities and the complexity of the past. Here we have the notable example of Egerton Ryerson, his identity now severed from Toronto Metropolitan University. On a smaller scale, my own institution, Queen’s University, has reckoned with the name of its law school building, formerly Sir John A. Macdonald Hall. The current crisis in the Middle East has spurred other efforts at

renaming, including unofficial ones initiated by students at, for instance, McGill University, though in this case the intent is to bring attention to the Palestinian cause rather than to remove a controversial individual’s name.

“Must a name mean something?” Humpty Dumpty is asked in *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*. Lewis Carroll had great fun with names, recognizing the degree to which they bestow identity, differentiate the self from others, and denote objects. Namings, whether of babies, buildings, or dogs (cats, as T. S. Eliot advised, need three names), are no light matter. Unnamings, however, raise the stakes considerably since they are less about conferring a fresh honour than about removing an existing one. Currently unnamings are also wrapped up with other issues: with the recent pendulum swing (especially in the United States) against “wokery” and diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in all their manifestations; with social justice and reconciliation; and with growing political polarization in many democracies, including a disturbing resurgence of far-right parties in countries that, given their histories, ought to know better. There are implacable hard-liners and absolutists on both sides. At one extreme, we find those who would advocate public oblivion for any figure found wanting by today’s moral standards; their urgent pleas sometimes lack perspective, a nuanced understanding of past events, or the capacity to weigh the positive and the negative. (This does not necessarily mean

that they are wrong.) At the other extreme, firm opponents of un naming insist that modern morality and politics should play no part in historical commemoration, that the past can't be changed, and that "one can't erase history." Statues, say they, should remain where they are, and buildings should stay named as they are for as long as they stand.

At the risk of offending all sides, I see problems with both categorical positions, each of which misunderstands how history (as a form of human inquiry) actually works. Things aren't that simple. We certainly can't change the past, but we absolutely can and should feel free to change our choices about what to celebrate or denounce. Historians routinely rethink, revise, and rewrite on the basis of new evidence and questions generated by present knowledge. Those concerned with issues of commemoration need not be bound by the same canons and interests that guide those of us employed in academic or public history, but one hopes they might consider at least the following moral questions: Does the past demand of us more than the present? What debt do we owe to long-dead idols, especially those whose feet now appear to be clay? Does the commemoration of former notables outweigh our obligation to the living and, if so, under what circumstances? There are more practical questions to be addressed as well: What is the icon to be renamed, why was it erected, and by whom? Where is it located? Who will see it? Who is asking for a change and why? What is the material cost? (Replacing a few plaques and maps for a single building is one thing; renaming an entire street or even a city, such as the former town of Dundas, Ontario, now part of Hamilton, is another.) An argument can be made that cost should not enter into such discussions, but a counter-argument can just as easily be made that the money spent on loads of new street signs could be better spent addressing contemporary social problems, including those afflicting the very groups that demand the renaming.

We are rightly concerned that documents, archives, and historical evidence be preserved (understanding that no archive preserves everything from the past and that not everything from the past is preserved anywhere). And we should not, by accident or design, consign inconvenient

facts to an Orwellian memory hole. The recent removal of certain names from U.S. government websites and the purging of exhibits (and staff) in national museums are deeply worrying. Fortunately, the past itself shows that, on the whole, its tracks can rarely if ever be wiped away permanently; sources do tend to persist, though they may themselves be selective, often biased, and sometimes outright deceptive. Even totalitarian regimes have not succeeded in eradicating history, as the opening of archives in the former Soviet Union and East Germany demonstrates. This has been so since nearly the dawn of record keeping. The first Qin emperor of China went so far as to burn books and bury scholars alive in the third century BCE, but we still know a whole lot about pre-Qin history. Many other bonfires of knowledge have occurred from antiquity to the present, but the past always seems to endure. Our knowledge of it is imperfect but substantial, and it is never fixed in one state.

Removing a name from a building, relocating a statue, or rechristening a street does not accomplish what the ancient Greeks and Romans wished on evildoers: the consign-ment of their memory to oblivion, or *damnatio memoriae*. We collectively remember the vicious as much as the virtuous, Cleon as much as Pericles, Nero alongside Seneca, with due skepticism toward the often biased portraits of them written by their enemies. We also make valiant efforts not to bestow posthumous fame on mass murderers and haters by endlessly repeating their names, though we are inconsistent in doing so and one can google the identity of such wretched creatures in two seconds. Where names have lived on in memory, in written records, oral tradition, or archeology, they are more likely than not to survive till we, and the world, are done.



UNLIKE THE MATERIAL AND WRITTEN EVIDENCE that informs our understanding of the past and keeps historians in business, and that is for the most part out of sight, public historical commemoration is only secondarily about the past and its preservation. It is primarily about us, our values, what we choose to make prominent, and what lessons we hope will be gleaned. Indeed, some monuments are created precisely to remind us of past crimes (though not

their malefactors) rather than of meritorious achievements. Up against the many streets in Berlin named for the Goethes, Hegels, Kants, and Beethovens of the world, there are memorials to the Holocaust, not merely the iconic Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe near the Brandenburg Gate but also the *Stolpersteine* or "stumbling stones" that dot pavements in multiple German cities, marking the homes and offices of murdered victims of the Nazis.

"The life of the dead," said the Roman orator Cicero, "is placed in the memory of the living." But the values of the living change, sometimes very quickly. The dead, as the historian Thomas Laqueur has written, do valuable work among us, but (at least in Western cultures) they have no permanent entitlement to prominent and continuous commemoration: it is we the living who choose when and how to remember them. We have an obligation to evaluate the reasons for continuing to commemorate them fairly and with open minds. As Voltaire remarked, "We owe respect to the living; to the dead we owe only the truth." This debt implies a duty to protect the record of their time on earth in its fullness and is related to professional historians' ethical imperative to be cautious, truthful, and balanced in basing stories upon that record.

Removing our first prime minister's name from a pub or a highway may upset some people, but it will not make the next generation of schoolchildren ask, "Sir John who?" It may, however, serve a contemporary social goal such as reconciliation. Contrarily, decapitating a statue or tossing it in the river, as happened in 2020 to the Bristol worthy and slave trader Edward Colston, neither eradicates a figure's memory nor brings solace to the immediate victims of his transactions.

Any argument for an un naming must turn on multiple considerations, and only one of these is really "historical"—related to the subject as a past living being. It's the notional score sheet of merits and demerits in a person's life: in John A. Macdonald's case, for example, weighing up the Canadian Pacific Railway and Confederation versus the execution of Louis Riel and the existence of residential schools. Issues of the present must be *one* factor in these deliberations, though not necessarily the deciding element. Does the harm of removing a controversial person's



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name from a building or moving his statue into an enclosed location (where it might be safe from vandalism) really outweigh the good in removing the hurt felt by those who have no choice but to visit or work in that building? And where do we draw the line between the forgivable and unforgivable? The answer will vary with each examination and even then won't necessarily remain fixed. There isn't a single line to be drawn, and very few cases are so clear-cut that they require no discussion. There are outliers: no one outside the fringe far right would lobby for an Adolf Hitler Museum to provide a "balanced" assessment of the führer's "achievements." Germany itself has on the whole reckoned honestly with its skeletons (and, as Germans are wont to do, they have even created a long compound word for such "work of coping with the past": *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*).

But even here, the fullness of time can bestow partial amnesty on the worst of villains, a collective forgetting of pain and dulling of a once sharp sense of horror. We can't predict what ensuing centuries will say about Hitler, and, as the historian Gavriel Rosenfeld and others have shown, barely eighty years after the end of the Second World War, the last century's greatest monster has become again, as he was briefly in the '60s, a figure of light fiction and black humour as the Nazi record is "normalized" by comparison with other atrocities. We can see similar shifts even in less egregious cases involving killers and alleged killers. As the conservative legal theorist F. H. Buckley noted in 2004, with reference to the D.C. sniper attacks two years earlier, "I feel less angry about the snipers than I did a year ago, much less upset about O. J. Simpson than I did ten years ago. And I feel positively benign about Bluebeard the Pirate." There's always a fresh atrocity on the horizon that will challenge those of the past for top marks in the grim "worst things ever done" competition of human history — more "never agains" to be marked.

"Let's not judge the past, lest the future judge us." It's a pleasant thought but one misplaced. The future will inevitably judge us — as well it should. We (my own boomer generation, in particular) have a lot to answer for on the environment alone, though it would be good if our positive contributions were also set on the scales. The twenty-second century's obligation to celebrate our achievements won't outweigh whatever social justice needs our descendants feel must be satisfied — or their sense of grievance. The best we can expect is the best we can ourselves offer: an unprejudiced hearing that accounts for both successes (or at least those still deemed successes) and failures.

If I have a worry about the future's judgment of our present, it isn't that such evaluations may be critical but rather that the evidence informing them will be considerably scander than is necessary to understand us fully. Much of what we leave behind for future generations will be electronic, self-censored, and ephemeral, in contrast to the paper and parchment documents generated over previous centuries. In an age of growing authoritarianism, fake news, and suppression of history, it is the preservation of these sources (and of access to them), rather than the permanence of honorific commemorations, that should concern us most.

Failure to preserve the records of today in whatever form they take? Now *that* would be a genuine erasure of history. ▲

IN A NUTSHELL

Improving Upper Canada: Agricultural Societies and State Formation, 1791–1852 *Ross Fair*

WRITING IN THE PAGES OF THE *UPPER CANADA Gazette* in October 1826, Robert Stanton called for the "establishment and encouragement of agricultural societies throughout the Province." This, the King's printer argued, would be "the most effectual method" of bringing husbandry into the modern age. To make his point, he referred to existing societies in "the Mother Country," which received "general support from all classes." As the historian Ross Fair wryly puts it, "Stanton was somewhat out of touch."

Four years later, a statute was finally passed to provide "government support and public funding to establish an agricultural society in each district of the province." Prior attempts to do so — mostly by merchants and social elites in Niagara, Kingston, Guelph, and York — form the first half of Fair's *Improving Upper Canada* (University of Toronto Press). The second half of this excellent book deals with how such efforts eventually led to the county exhibitions and government bodies, both provincial and federal, that continue to shape farming today.

A nuanced work told with accessible, understated authority, *Improving Upper Canada* could have used another map or two, but it is the type of well-written, well-edited history that serious readers deserve. Thankfully, Fair's next book, about imperial and colonial efforts to encourage Canadian hemp production for the Royal Navy (also touched upon here), is already under way.

Transforming the Prairies: Agricultural Rehabilitation and Modern Canada *Shannon Stunden Bower*

A REVISIONIST STUDY RATHER THAN A "BORING institutional biography," Shannon Stunden Bower's *Transforming the Prairies* (UBC Press) recounts the surprisingly far-reaching story of the Canadian Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration, which influenced unsettlement and reclamation policies, irrigation infrastructure, and small-scale or "low-modernist" stewardship between 1935 and 2009. Created by R. B. Bennett's Conservative government and dissolved under Stephen Harper, the PFRA played a key role in the twentieth-century dispossession of Indigenous communities — including a Métis settlement at Ste. Madeleine, Manitoba, driven out to make room for one of the sixty-plus community pastures — and the introduction of the now ubiquitous crested wheatgrass.

A historian at the University of Alberta, Stunden Bower is most engaging on the topic

Grain

Read what they sowed

of sugar beet cultivation around the Dominion Experimental Station in Lethbridge. Although she might have said more about the "muskrat activity" that "plagued" irrigation projects in the early twentieth century (too many juicy details are left to wither on the vine), Stunden Bower describes how the beet industry took advantage of Japanese Canadians involuntarily displaced during the Second World War and other marginalized groups. She also cogently explains how strip farming helped to "counteract the soil drift problems of the 1930s" but created the perfect conditions for the destructive wheat stem sawfly.

"The line between sub-marginal and better lands" proved "mobile" throughout the PFRA's existence, as did points of agreement between Ottawa and the Prairie provinces. Published before April's federal election, *Improving the Prairies* is, among other things, a cautionary tale for the implementation of Bill C-5.

The Last Farm on McNabs: A Family History of Twentieth-Century Life on the Island *Bruce Scott*

IN THE SPRING OF 1923, BRUCE SCOTT'S NEWLYWED grandparents, Ernest and Annie Farrant, emigrated from England and bought a farm — on McNabs Island, in Halifax Harbour — that came with a double-bladed plow and lots of potential. Within ten years, they were keeping cows, goats, and hens; growing tomatoes, cucumbers, and squash; and selling hay, mink pelts, and dairy — not to mention raising five children.

Early on, Ernest rowed to Dartmouth to purchase a couple of cows and a bull, which all had to swim to their new home. While pregnant and carrying scraps to the pigpen, Annie tripped over Buddy the dog, inducing labour. She gave birth to Scott's mother, Jean, in a two-cylinder boat on the way to the hospital, where a twin sister was born. Gradually the family became self-sufficient and had surplus produce and eggs to offer members of the military stationed on the island, so they could afford the occasional treat in the city — like bananas or blue cheese.

Ernest shut down operations after the Second World War, but he and Annie stayed until his death, in October 1970. Scott, who used to summer with his grandparents, presents the fifty-year period in which his family lived on McNabs as an idyllic one, even if he once got caught in a dense fog and had to crawl home on a rutted road. Residents and the island were inextricably linked back then. After Frederick Perrin died, for example, "his apple and plum trees never bore fruit again." With *The Last Farm on McNabs* (Nimbus Publishing), Scott has put up one-of-a-kind memories for future generations. ▲

Current Affairs

Those who survived maritime disaster

Sheldon Goldfarb

Beneath Dark Waters: The Legacy of the *Empress of Ireland* Shipwreck

Eve Lazarus

Arsenal Pulp Press

344 pages, softcover, ebook, and audiobook

The Lucky and the Lost:

The Lives of *Titanic*'s Children

John Boileau, with Patricia Boileau Theriault

Nimbus Publishing

264 pages, softcover and ebook

JUST AFTER MIDNIGHT ON MAY 29, 1914, THE *Empress of Ireland* sank in the St. Lawrence River, with a loss of 836 passengers, four more than had died on the *Titanic* two years earlier. Almost everyone has heard of the *Titanic*, but how many have heard of the *Empress of Ireland*? Eve Lazarus hadn't before she began her research, which she embarked on only because of a request from someone fascinated by the story of Gordon Davidson, a survivor who supposedly swam six and a half kilometres to shore from the sinking ship.

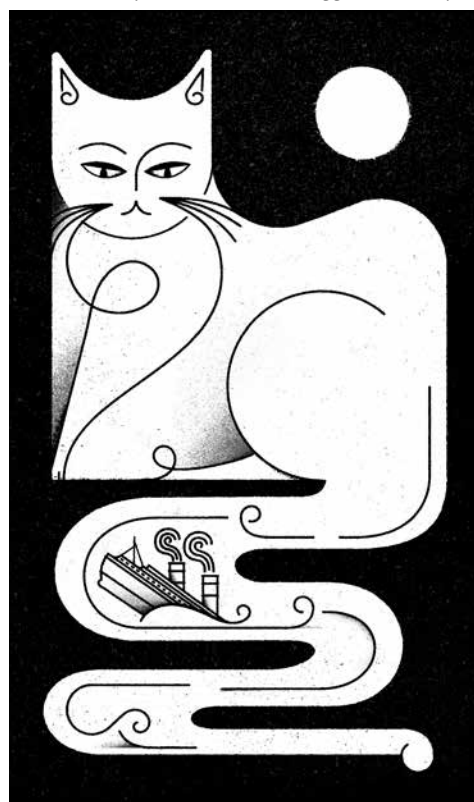
Impossible, said the experts. And although Davidson's swim became legendary, Lazarus discovered that the reality was less dramatic. The graduate student from Union, Ontario, actually swam to a lifeboat and thus was eventually able to continue his journey to England to complete his doctorate in history—even if his notes went down with the ship. Davidson's life is perhaps the most interesting in Lazarus's *Beneath Dark Waters* and perhaps one of the saddest. After he earned his degree, Davidson went off to fight in the First World War, where he was seriously wounded. He ended up in Vancouver, teaching at the University of British Columbia, but he struggled with what we would now call post-traumatic stress disorder and died by suicide in 1922.

Others had happier stories. Arthur Delamont, for example, was one of the many Salvation Army band members travelling to London. He, too, ended up in Vancouver, where he founded a well-known boys' band whose members over the years included the bandleader Dal Richards, the architect Bing Thom, and the entrepreneur Jimmy Pattison.

Lazarus devotes the last third of her book to accounts of the survivors (perhaps that is the legacy her subtitle refers to), but the best part is the story of the accident itself, which remains mysterious to this day. The *Empress of Ireland* left Quebec City late on the afternoon of May 28. It was clear sailing through the evening and night, but then fog rolled in and the ship collided with a Norwegian vessel, the *Storstad*. The Canadian Pacific ocean liner sank quickly, and Lazarus is very good at recounting the panic, the quick

thinking (one passenger escaped through a porthole, and others clung to wreckage in the icy waters), the overall confusion, and the sombre makeshift morgue in Rimouski.

Who was at fault? The two captains pointed fingers at each other. Local officials blamed the *Storstad*, which was exonerated by a Norwegian investigation. Lazarus tries to be even-handed, but the bow of the *Storstad* ended up in the starboard side of the *Empress*, so it is hard to accept the Norwegian view that the passenger ship hit the collier; it must have been the other way around. But it's possible that the *Empress* changed course in a way that caused the collision, as many online sleuths suggest. Or maybe



Some observers of the tragedy blamed the cat.

we should blame the notorious Hawley Crippen. The captain of the *Empress*, Henry Kendall, had played a role in the murderous homeopath's capture years earlier, and one tale is that Crippen cursed him in revenge. Kendall did seem unlucky; besides the 1914 disaster, he was on the scene for the Halifax explosion in December 1917. Or maybe it was the cat. Since the launch of the *Empress of Ireland* in 1906, Emmy had been on every voyage—or so the story goes—but before the final one, she jumped ship. A bad omen, some thought.

♦

JOHN BOILEAU DOESN'T TELL US TOO MUCH ABOUT causes and culpability in his book on the *Titanic*. Rather, *The Lucky and the Lost* focuses on the

children, with fascinating accounts of those who lived and those who didn't.

Consider the Navratil brothers, abducted by their father in a custody dispute with his ex-wife, Marcelle. The Slovakian tailor living in Nice, France, changed his name and took the boys with him to England, boarding the ship in Southampton in April 1912. They survived the wreck, but he did not, and for a while they were known as the "*Titanic* orphans," until their Italian mother saw a photograph in the newspaper and reunited with them in New York (the White Star Line covered her ticket aboard the *Oceanic*).

Loraine Allison and her mother could have escaped onto a lifeboat but instead went looking for Loraine's brother, Trevor. Unbeknownst to them, Trevor was already safely on another lifeboat with the nanny. Sadly, both Loraine and her mother died. But an imposter came forward years later, claiming to be Loraine Allison; she became known as the Anastasia of the *Titanic*, in an allusion to the women purporting to be the murdered youngest daughter of Czar Nicholas II.

Loraine was the only child in first class to die. If you were young in first or second class, you had a good chance of survival, largely because of the traditional "women and children first" rule, which was strictly enforced on the *Titanic*, so much so that some men were kept out of lifeboats at gunpoint. Still, half the children died (mostly in third class), which upsets Boileau. If the rule had been followed more strictly, he argues, all of the kids could have lived.

Not actually part of maritime law, the old rule wasn't followed at all on the *Empress of Ireland*; it was everyone for themselves, perhaps because there was so little time to flee (just fourteen minutes, compared with more than two hours on the *Titanic*). Only three of the 139 children escaped the *Empress of Ireland*, or about 2 percent.

On the St. Lawrence, those who reached safety were mostly the crew. Did they neglect the passengers? Lazarus suggests they just knew the ship better. Nearly two-thirds of them made it to shore, while only a quarter of the *Titanic* crew set foot on land again.

Boileau looks for patterns in all the information he has gathered on the children: Did the survivors tend to die young? Did they marry and have children of their own? Did they embrace publicity? But the answers vary, and there seem to be no patterns. There seem to be no patterns either for the survivors of the *Empress of Ireland*: one died by suicide, while another became a respected bandleader. All of them endured catastrophe. However compelling these two tragedies are, it is not clear in either book how they shaped the people who came through them. ▲

Exclaim!

Pop punk in the key of eh

Emily Latimer

In Too Deep: When Canadian Punks Took Over the World

Matt Bobkin and Adam Feibel

House of Anansi Press

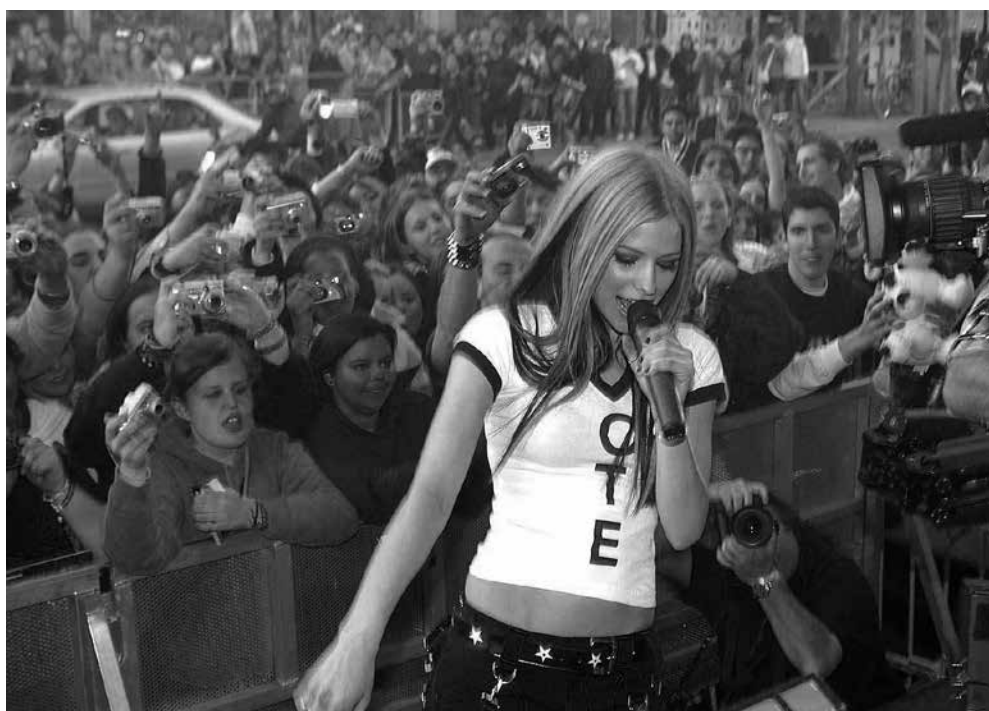
344 pages, softcover and ebook

IN 2016, *ROLLING STONE* OBSERVED THAT “punk rock began as a kind of negation — a call to stark, brutal simplicity.” The magazine was referring to the frenetic, raw sound developed by the Ramones in the late 1970s: loud guitars converging with anti-authoritarian and anti-establishment lyrics. Over the following two decades, the movement splintered into dozens of subgroups, including hardcore, riot grrrl, and post-punk. Without getting too caught up in the definition of the genre, Matt Bobkin and Adam Feibel consider yet another offshoot — pop punk — with *In Too Deep: When Canadian Punks Took Over the World*.

Bobkin and Feibel look at nine angsty acts, including chart-topping Sum 41 and business-savvy Simple Plan, and their palatability to mainstream audiences. “You could be popular in Canada or outside of Canada,” they write of industry assumptions, “but rarely both.” Bobkin and Feibel also profile seven other artists who defied the odds and made it. The authors offer familiar yet surprising origin stories of those who went from playing “sparsely attended gigs in basements, community halls, and mom-and-pop restaurants to performing for millions of TV viewers.” They describe the genesis of each band, from humble beginnings to breakthrough, and, in many cases, their eventual push for representation south of the border.

Looking at the North American music scene around the turn of the millennium, Bobkin and Feibel immerse readers in a specific slice of the constantly evolving history of punk. By the time Alexisonfire emerged in the early 2000s, the “harder, faster, and more ferocious” noise of previous decades had transformed into a softer sound. With their more melodic, marketable songs, some garage bands were gearing up to “break through the barriers of their domestic music industry to become the face of their generation’s own counterculture.”

Another band, Gob, stood out amid the intense sound that “dominated” their local Vancouver scene with a “new strain of poppier, Ramones-influenced” rock. In the mid-’90s, they were something of a novelty, with their “ability to write a catchy song.” They became big among teens who played video games and watched MuchMusic after school — the channel “where new artists could find their audiences.” Although Gob never gained traction stateside,



Avril Lavigne performs outside MuchMusic’s downtown Toronto studios in May 2004.

Bobkin and Feibel cite them as “the country’s first real answer to Green Day and the California punk scene.” The group, which still plays shows throughout Canada, cleared the way for a new wave of pop-adjacent records.

Almost everyone featured in the book had to contend with bad deals, creative clashes, negative publicity, and other challenges — including from fans. Despite the bona fide punk roots of some performers, diehards called out anyone pursuing commercial success for being an “industry plant” or, worse, “a total sellout.” In a subculture defined by the spurning of convention, it was impossible to sign deals with “corporate overlords” without catching some flak.

Readers searching for a comprehensive critique of punk culture, however, should look elsewhere. *In Too Deep* focuses on one important period of music and a handful of artists who moved toward pop, post-hardcore, or emo. Many of those chronicled here weren’t strictly punk, despite the book’s subtitle, and they were among the first to admit it.

Take Avril Lavigne — the most commercially successful of the bunch. The star from Napanee, Ontario, was accused by critics and fans alike of “co-opting the aesthetics of punk rock to make an easy buck.” Even at nineteen, Lavigne knew the genre was “a touchy subject.” She never claimed to be influenced by the “aggressive form of music, which is very political,” or by punk as “a way of life.” Inspired by Blink-182 and System of a Down, she wanted to be her sulky and contrarian teenage self. Despite an early marketing

plan that was “thicker than the Bible,” her rebellious nature “endeared her to the public” and her label ultimately gave her “a licence to be herself.”

Others weren’t so lucky. Fefe Dobson suffered from restrictive contracts and producers who didn’t understand her. In an interview with the authors, the singer from Scarborough, Ontario, revealed how poorly she was positioned in the market after her self-titled debut in 2003. A few years later, after Dobson was dropped for being “too rock and roll for pop, and too pop for rock and roll,” her label used songs she wrote for young Disney stars like Miley Cyrus and Selena Gomez — a telling anecdote that warrants more attention than it’s given here.

Nonetheless, those who grew up on the profiled bands will find much to enjoy in these wistful pages. Featuring conversations with musicians, glimpses into the archives, footnotes, and song recommendations, it’s a wholesome celebration of the angst that shaped a generation of listeners.

I certainly count myself among that generation. At my celebrity-themed birthday party in September 2002, almost everyone arrived dressed as Lavigne. Just three months earlier, she had released her debut record, *Let Go*. Even in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, we had all donned our fathers’ neckties in an attempt to recreate her signature “anti-fashion” look. While seven-year-old girls like us were hardly the intended audience for punk rock early on, *In Too Deep* tells the story of how we became some of the most ardent fans of the genre — or a form of it anyway. ▲

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Airmail

The sweet sorcery of baseball

David Marks Shribman

Field Work: On Baseball and Making a Living

Andrew Forbes

Assembly Press

222 pages, softcover and ebook

MY SHELVES, AND MAYBE YOURS, hold many linear feet of books that purport to describe the character and caprice of baseball. Some are elegies, some are poetry, some are simply collections of photographs. Many of them are the scratchings of yokel hacks out to make a buck rewriting their old clippings and regurgitating what the latest superstar did last season, adding the *de rigueur* up-from-nothing or father-in-jail or heroic-single-mother or studious-loner-in-a-rat-infested-school element. Many of these volumes defy Canadian Food Inspection Agency guidelines: they have a limited shelf life, but for reasons beyond understanding, they remain on display across the continent.

Andrew Forbes's *Field Work: On Baseball and Making a Living* is something different, a literary version of the "kick change," the pitch with the unusual vertical break that emerged last season to bedevil hitters from Rogers Centre to Dodger Stadium. This book is a series of reflections on the game, its moral order, and its geography, history, and theology. It celebrates customs and traditions. Its distinct qualities as a noteworthy addition to the canon become evident by the sixth page, when Forbes puts it this way:

Baseball is a game of decisions. Swing or take? Run or hold? Take the sure out at first or try to nail the lead runner? Yank this pitcher or give him one more out? And in cases where one disagrees with an umpire's call, which rule applies to the particular situation and what are the potential consequences of skirting it? When I disagree with the umpire's call, is it worth arguing the decision?

All of which leads readers to a question of their own: Read on or flip to Sportsnet to watch the Toronto Blue Jays play the hapless Chicago White Sox or even the New York Yankees? My vote: read on.

It turns out that Forbes — who is both a writer and a coach of fourteen-year-old ballplayers in Peterborough, Ontario — is an enemy of precision, which is as good a definition of a baseball fan as I can conjure. The sport's beauty is in its ambiguity and in the intermingling of skill and judgment. That is why he, like me, deplores the invasive species of the video replay



Step up to the plate and work the count.

to ascertain this foul ball or that trapped field catch. Baseball is the most relatable of athletic endeavours — played by people on a human scale, with human foibles. It is certainly not perfect. Just ask Bo Bichette, whose reign of error was a prominent feature of the first half of the current Blue Jays campaign.

The less erudite among us might argue for letting the umps be umps, and letting them take their lumps. Forbes does us one better, celebrating the inexactitude of the old game in a world of imprecision:

In the case of close plays, it seems to me that truth is less important than maintaining a clear hierarchy of governance alongside jurisdictional transparency. The field ought to belong to the umpires — marshals of order — with the crew chief atop them all. Fallibility is part of the deal; if perfection is the goal, then once we replace all umps with cameras, I can't see why we wouldn't just swap the players for robots. Then we can all sit back and place our bets.

As its title suggests, Forbes's offering is a meditation on work — a brief sequel, you might say, to George F. Will's wonderful *Men at Work: The Craft of Baseball*, from 1990. Both volumes present a rhetorical quandary and question: Why do we employ the word "play" when we speak of the "work" of pitching a baseball at ninety-plus miles per hour or hitting it from the plate

that's sixty feet, six inches away? Indeed, why do players speak of reporting to the clubhouse 162 days a year as going to work? (I lived next door to the pitcher Jeff Suppan for a while, and that is the phrase he always used.) Perhaps that is an athlete's way of reminding us that what seems easy in the grandstand is hard on the ground. "Livings cobbled together, baseball dreams deferred, or savings banked in service of an off-field dream — there's no textbook approach to the relationship between working and playing," Forbes tells us. "Labourers with bat and glove, labourers with pick, pencil, industrial press, stethoscope. Are the figures on the diamond playing or working?" For that matter, is the writer of this review at work or simply engaging in wordplay?

One of my favourite parts of *Field Work* is Forbes's artful discussion of one of the long-ago aspects of the game: the fact that the boys of summer used to do various kinds of work in the winter. He reminds us that one was a sculptor, another a dentist, a third a gravedigger. Moe Berg was a spy. A handful, including Christy Mathewson and Rube Marquard, were vaudevillians. Stan Musial was a clerk in his father-in-law's grocery. There was something about the off-season that grounded men who, in warmer months, handled ground balls. It made them part of life beyond the bleachers.

Forbes packs a surprising amount of merit into a brisk book of 200 or so pages, where some of the chapters are but seven or eight paragraphs long. One of those chapters tells

the story of Alfred Henry Spink, who was born in Quebec City in 1854. Some thirty-two years later, in St. Louis, Missouri, he started a weekly called *The Sporting News*, which in time became the go-to bulletin of the Church of Baseball. All fans of the diamond knew the allure of that fat bundle of newsprint delivered to the doorway and jammed with every single box score from the past week. What we didn't realize at the time was that after the magazine's staff had maintained player index cards for more than a century, covering 172,000 veterans of the sport, those paper records would be fed into a charmless computer program. "In aggregate," Forbes writes, "they constitute a massive trove of information about a group of individuals spanning economic and social lines who shared a profession, a fraternity of workers who donned uniforms and equipment to jog out onto baseball diamonds, their jobsites landscapes of dirt and grass."

Men at work. A capacious, capricious mind at keyboard play. The combination is dazzling and unpredictable. There's no particular reason that Forbes tells us of the first game where admission was charged — an 1858 match between amateur players from New York and Brooklyn, staged at the Elysian Fields in Hoboken, New Jersey — except perhaps to explain that entry cost ten cents but that it cost an additional twenty cents for a space for your one-horse brougham. "Then as now," he writes, "you might find a deal on tickets, but the parking will kill you."

◆
IN MANY RESPECTS, FORBES IS A JANUS FIGURE, casting his gaze backwards and forwards. "Baseball fandom is particularly susceptible to

long looks back," he observes. "It's a sport with a deep history, a penchant for self-aggrandizing memorialization." True enough. Then he does a little memorialization of his own: "Depression-era journeymen with torn and dirty uniforms, missing teeth? Okay! Another photo of Mickey Mantle, Whitey Ford, Billy Martin, and Bob Grimm palling around, sipping Cokes, fishing in their undershirts? How do I subscribe?" Later he describes the game as "a potent totem of innocence — a child's game, attached to early memories of Maris, Mantle, and Mays, and jamming cards into your bicycle spokes, and playing pickup games in dungarees and P.F. Flyers." The reader who needs a first name for Maris, Mantle, or Mays need not pick up this book.

That's not to say Forbes is a hopeless anti-quarian — not by any stretch. He salutes Shohei Ohtani, Ronald Acuña Jr., Mookie Betts, and Gerrit Cole, and he suggests we are "in the midst of a new golden era, populated by some of the greatest players ever to take the field." Forbes also knows that baseball at its best remains a matter of community, and he lingers on the St. Paul Saints, the Triple-A outfit that plays just twenty kilometres away from where the Minnesota Twins toil but in a different world entirely. Even after the 2021 purge of minor-league teams, the Saints, like so many small clubs, provide an outlet for "last-chance players sliding, diving, and stumbling across real dirt and grass." Between innings in their intimate ballpark, he has witnessed "an eyeball race, a golf chip shot competition, a dizzy bat race, and kids piloting out-of-control go-karts." And you thought that the retired MLB outfielder Gary Sheffield had a dizzy bat.

Forbes is not alone in this sort of reverie. Just this spring, Will Bardenwerper came out with his *Homeland: Small Town Baseball and the Fight for the Soul of America*, a torch song to innings played in tiny Batavia, New York. "The MLB game has begun to resemble a computer simulation," Bardenwerper writes. "Suffocating talk of 'spin rates' and 'launch angles' has taken away from baseball's abstract beauty, with references to computer modeling dominating broadcasts and replacing the poetic cadences of the great sportswriters and broadcasters of old." Together, *Homeland* and *Field Work* make for a sparkling double-play combination.

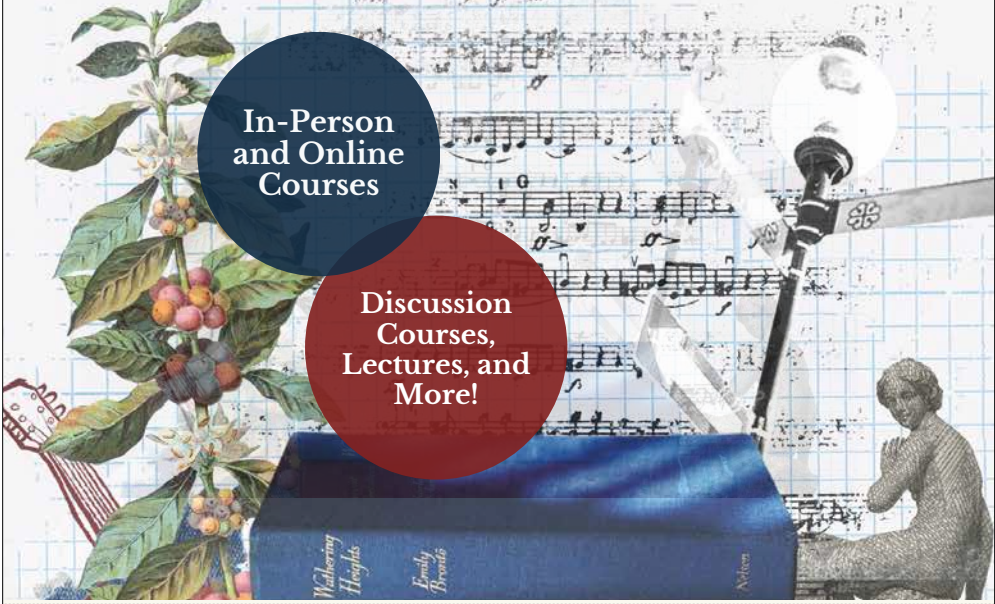
The episodes and anecdotes conveyed in Forbes's work — here's that word again — are predominantly from the United States, but he brings a distinct Canadian air, along with some memories of youth sports in Ontario and an account of Toronto's fantasy attempt at signing Ohtani. The reader north of the border will also find comfort in seeing that Jackie Robinson breached the "colour line" and not the "color line," that Forbes speaks of "your favourite team," and that a players' strike is described as a "labour dispute." Baseball is Canada's game, too, and not only because Ferguson Jenkins, of Chatham, Ontario, and Larry Walker, of Maple Ridge, British Columbia, are in the hall of fame down in Cooperstown.

For me, at least, there is a particularly poignant game in these pages. Forbes speaks fondly of old Forbes Field (no relation), the one-time home of the Pittsburgh Pirates, situated a fungo from where I am typing these words. Opened in 1909 and closed in 1970, Forbes Field, "so perfectly situated on its very particular plot of land, arranged a rural idyll amid the urban grid, a green respite from the smog and tumult of Pittsburgh's twentieth-century cauldron of industry." Upon reading that passage, I paused to steer my roadster over to the beloved site, on Roberto & Vera Clemente Drive. Here still stands the wall over which Bill Mazeroski launched his 1960 walk-off World Series home run to defeat the wicked Yankees. It's lovingly tended by the city parks department, much the way our sporting souls are tended by baseball memories. As I stared at the shiny red brick gleaming in the summertime sun, I thought of Mazeroski, who, to cadge a line from Simon and Garfunkel, seems like a dream to me now.

In my mind, I see Maz himself, rounding the diamond, holding up his cap with its embroidered "P" as he proceeds past third and hurdles the ninety feet toward home plate and into history. I never saw that in real time, and neither did Forbes. But it nonetheless is part of our memories, his and mine and maybe yours. It speaks to an essential element in the sweet sorcery of baseball: knowing, appreciating, and revering what came before us, sometimes long before us, often not visible even in vintage newsreels. Some of these memories aren't even ours, though we have, by some baseball mystery, absorbed them, vivid and enduring. My dad, for example, pulled for the old Boston Braves in a ballpark on the site now occupied by Boston University's Nickerson Field, rooting for Warren Spahn and Johnny Sain and, almost certainly, praying for rain. In a world of imagination that's richer than actual memory, like so much in *Field Work*, so do I, seventy-two years after the Braves decamped for Milwaukee and broke the heart of Boston. ▲


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Louise Beaudoin still dreams of independence

Graham Fraser

Louise Beaudoin: Entretiens
Stéphane Paquin and Mathieu Roy
 Les Éditions du Boréal
 280 pages, softcover and ebook

IN THE TYPOLOGY OF POLITICAL ACTIVISTS, Louise Beaudoin is a realist rather than an idealist. That is not to suggest that she does not have ideals; she is and has always been a believer in Quebec independence. Nor is it to suggest that she lacks principles; fourteen years ago, she resigned from the Parti Québécois while a member of the Assemblée nationale because she profoundly disagreed with the leader at the time, Pauline Marois.

Beaudoin is a pragmatist. Although a progressive herself, she worked to develop relationships within every segment of the political spectrum in France, from left to right. After briefly serving as unelected minister of international relations, she went to Téléfilm Canada. Despite her commitment to democracy, she dealt with dictators in the Francophonie, the French-speaking counterpart to the Commonwealth, arguing, "If we had decided only to talk to really democratic nations, there wouldn't have been many countries around the table, even in Europe."

Now almost eighty, Beaudoin has worked with two academics, Stéphane Paquin and Mathieu Roy, to produce a collection of interviews that cover her upper-middle-class childhood in Quebec City, where her father was a lawyer active in the Union Nationale and then a judge; her years at classical college and university; her political involvement; and her varied career as an activist, political adviser, public servant, diplomat, and administrator. Blunt, candid, charming, lucid, she has used her position, whatever it has been, to pursue her policy objectives.

I remember Beaudoin speaking out at a Parti Québécois convention in 1981 in favour of unhyphenated independence without necessarily an association with the rest of Canada. She had stopped advising Claude Morin, then René Lévesque's minister of intergovernmental affairs, and had become a public servant, which, paradoxically, gave her the freedom of speech that she did not have as a political aide.

Despite her clear ideological commitments, she had positive relationships with her political opponents: the night that the 1980 referendum was defeated, both Robert Bourassa, the former Liberal premier, and Jean Marchand, the former Liberal senator and federal cabinet minister, expressed their sympathy. That prompted her to reflect on what a tight family Quebec was. "After all, two of our principal adversaries

were there to console me," she observes. "It was testimony, I believe, to the great respect everyone had for René Lévesque. The man was always larger than the politician." Elsewhere, she adds that "even forty years after his death, everyone claims a fragment of the true cross of René Lévesque, including me." She was close to Lévesque; along with François Dorlot, her husband, she had dinner with him a week before he died.

Just as Bourassa and Marchand showed their respect for her, she reciprocates in her description of Gérard Pelletier, the journalist that Pierre Trudeau appointed ambassador to France in 1975, describing him as "an honest man, reasonable, an incarnation of the ideal of a bilingual



Upon leaving the PQ caucus on June 6, 2011.

and bicultural Canada. He was profoundly Québécois, a friend of René Lévesque and Pierre Elliott Trudeau....Pelletier was sensible, and able to manoeuvre and argue in stormy waters."

Beaudoin is straightforward about the referendum defeats, which she saw as representative of the views of Quebecers at the time:

We were talking about independence since the 1960s. It's not because people hadn't understood. I am far from thinking that the struggle is over, but I have concluded that in 1995 a majority of us were not convinced. We have to realize that there is a lot of uncertainty in the minds of Quebecers. To achieve independence,

there has to be an irrepressible need. A majority of the population did not feel, we have to believe, so politically oppressed within Canada.

Still, she remains hopeful that the province's changing demographic status in Canada and in North America might lead Quebecers to conclude that independence is essential.

Ever the realist, following the constitutional agreement in 1982, she explained the situation to two French friends, both former prime ministers under Charles de Gaulle, who did not understand how Quebec got nothing out of the negotiations that followed the referendum defeat in 1980. Quebec, she admitted, had no bargaining power in the talks that reached a climax with the patriation of the Constitution — over the province's objections.

Previously defeated three times, Beaudoin was elected to the Assemblée nationale in 1994 and 1998. As the minister of culture and communications, she was responsible for implementing the Charte de la langue française — still known in English as Bill 101, although it has long been a law — and started to crack down on what she saw as the creeping return of English on signs and menus. Terry Mosher, the cartoonist known as Aislin, began to draw her as, in his words, "a whip-cracking, leather-clad dominatrix." Readers of the *Gazette* were delighted, though she did not appreciate some of the Nazi overtones, which she thought cast her as "a she-wolf of the SS." Nevertheless, she sent Mosher a note when she left politics, written on one of his cartoons about her, saying she would miss having him in her life.

Beaudoin was defeated in the 2003 election, in large part because of the municipal mergers introduced by Lucien Bouchard's PQ government, but she regained a seat five years later, winning in the Montreal riding of Rosemont. But in mid-2011, after Marois, as leader of the opposition, decided to support a massive subsidy for a Quebec City arena in, designed to woo back an NHL franchise, Beaudoin left the party and sat as an independent. She rejoined the caucus a year later and, as she puts it, "spent my last moments in active politics at the heart of my family."

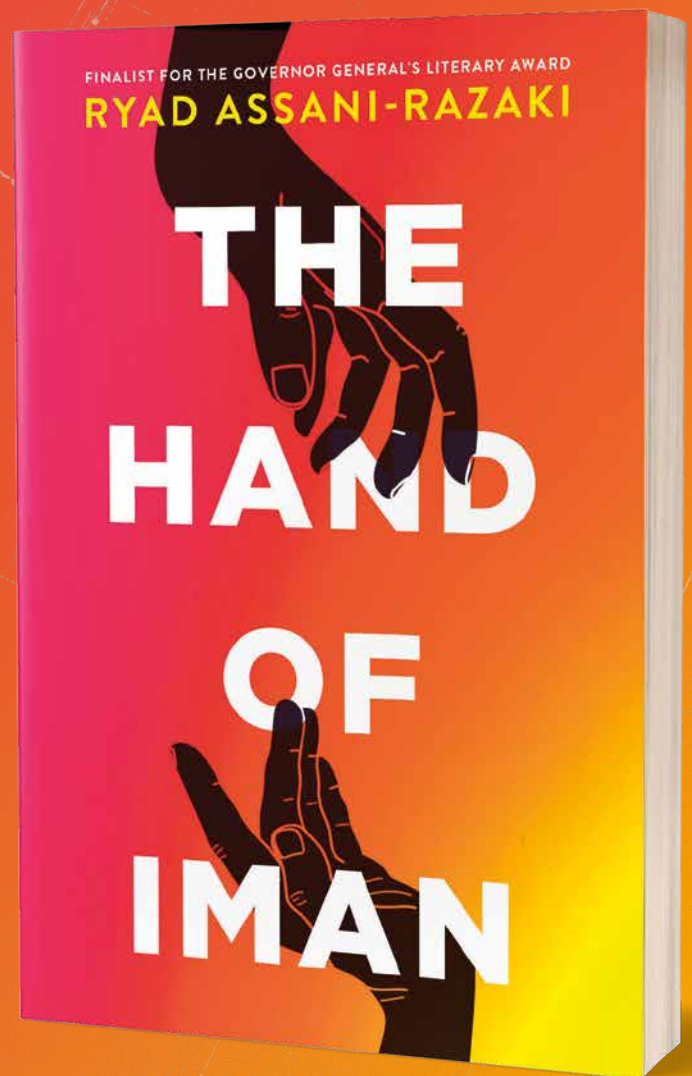
There were two enduring themes to Beaudoin's political career: her deep and strategic affection for France and her commitment to Quebec independence. Neither one gave her rose-coloured glasses, however: she is highly critical of Emmanuel Macron, describing the French president's policies as a failure, and she is candid about the referendum results, whereas many of her contemporaries continue to blame Ottawa for the outcome. *Louise Beaudoin: Entretiens* proves she's as blunt and direct as ever. ▲

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The Paris Review

A faithful restoration

Sandra Martin

ALMOST TWO YEARS AGO, I LEARNED about a private apartment in Paris that *might* be available for a short stay, the way one hears rumours about cottages on secluded lakes or ski chalets on distant slopes. Usually they are booked for the next ten years or have just been devastated by a hurricane or raging wildfire, but in this case, I was in luck.

Forget April in Paris: I opted for May 2025, which would precede the annual tourism crush beginning in late June—or so I thought—but mostly because it coincided with a significant birthday for my husband. What better place to celebrate than the city where we'd spent our honeymoon more than five decades earlier? Besides, we would be staying within earshot of the bells of Notre-Dame, the twelfth-century Gothic cathedral dedicated to the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, which had finally reopened after a catastrophic fire in April 2019. In the wake of the conflagration, France's president, Emmanuel Macron, had promised to rebuild, because "Notre-Dame is our history, our literature, part of our psyche."

Its site on the Île de la Cité, between the left and right banks of the Seine, had been exalted by both pagans and Christians for a thousand years when construction of the cathedral began in 1163. Besides being the place where ten-year-old Henry VI of England was crowned Henri II of France in 1431, Notre-Dame was where Napoleon anointed himself as emperor in 1804 and where Charles de Gaulle celebrated the liberation of Paris in 1944.

Our honeymoon had been a little less consequential, but I still remember climbing Quasimodo-like up the narrow winding stairs inside one of the bell towers. We were seeking adventure and an aerial view of Paris rather than sanctuary, but I averted my eyes from the open windows as the distance between me and the ground escalated. I knew from many visits to Niagara Falls that it would be hard to resist the impulse to jump, if only to swallow the terror of falling. A friend of mine once told me about a similar incident when her lover decided the sooty tower was the perfect place to propose marriage. When she resisted, he dangled himself on a ledge, threatening to drop unless she promised to marry him. She did, and they are still together.

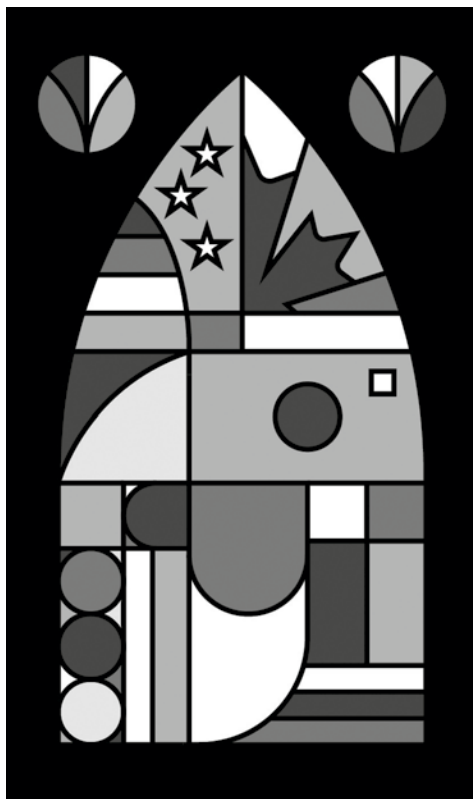
The things we do to appease the men we love.

♦

WHAT I DIDN'T KNOW WHEN I BOOKED THE ONE-bedroom apartment for a visit many months later was whether we would still be upright. Fortunately we were, and, having agreed on some ground rules—no driving, no overnight visitors, and at least one meal, preferably lunch, in a restaurant or bistro every day—we packed

our bags and set off. As with most trips, we learned a lot but not necessarily the things we had anticipated, especially about Notre-Dame, which, by consensus, represents the heart and soul of France. Just before it reopened in December 2024, Macron, who had allocated government money and spearheaded the broader fundraising and restoration efforts, publicly congratulated the artisans and labourers for their spectacular efforts: "The inferno of Notre-Dame was a wound for the nation," he declared. "And you were its remedy."

In restoring the building, with its side chapels, ribbed vaults, and flying buttresses, Macron was following the example of the poet, novelist,



How the pieces unexpectedly came together.

essayist, and statesman Victor Hugo. Two hundred years ago, Hugo was as influential, as prolific, and as multi-talented as Margaret Atwood is now. So when the exalted proponent of Romanticism made the cathedral a compelling character in his 1831 novel, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, 1482, people took notice. An impressive 31,000 copies were sold within eighteen months, according to the translator and editor John Sturrock, and the novel became even more popular when, two years later, it was published in English as *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. Then as now, tourists flocked to the iconic setting.

Hugo had chosen the year 1482 carefully: after Gutenberg had invented his printing press but before Columbus had "discovered" America.

As Sturrock explains in a recent Shakespeare and Company edition, he had written the novel "not merely to capture the Paris and people of the Middle Ages—in which he had long been interested and done enormous research—but with the express purpose of saving the great Gothic cathedral itself. Because, by the early nineteenth century, Notre-Dame was in a state of near-ruin." Time and events, especially the recent French Revolution, had been unkind to the cathedral. It was repurposed as a "temple of reason" to reflect the ethos of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*; all but one of its bells were melted down to make cannonballs; the nave was converted into a storage area for wine and grain; and most of the statues were destroyed, indeed beheaded, in the mistaken belief that they represented kings of France instead of saints and apostles.

The Hunchback of Notre-Dame does not compare to Hugo's *Les misérables*, but it tells a cinematic tale about the sixteen-year-old Roma street dancer Esmeralda; her canny goat, Djali; her besotted suitors, including the hapless poet Pierre Gringoire; the warped archdeacon Claude Frollo; and Quasimodo, the deaf and hunchbacked bell-ringer who offers her sanctuary.

That story galvanized public sentiment and shamed the government of the day into salvaging the decaying landmark. The restoration effort, which began a decade later, was carried out under the direction of Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, who had earlier worked on nearby Sainte-Chapelle, which had been commissioned, with its spectacular stained glass windows, by Louis IX in the thirteenth century. Viollet-le-Duc ordered new bells, repaired the smashed gargoyles and beheaded statues, installed glorious stained glass, and designed a new spire to replace the one that had been built between 1220 and 1230. Essentially, this was the grimy, dark cathedral my husband and I had visited back in the early 1970s, the Vietnam War era, when many of my friends were dodgers or deserters and I proudly wore a Maple Leaf pin.

Many of the random conversations we had with other travellers this spring reminded me of those fractious times. Mass tourism, even in the months before school was out, meant that there were queues everywhere, including at Claude Monet's home in Giverny, and that crush put us into contact with plenty of people from Donald Trump's America. My patriotic psyche was triggered as we watched shame and contrition flash across so many faces when they learned our nationality, followed by apologies and jocular pleas for Canada to annex parts of the United States. It became commonplace to reassure strangers that we didn't blame them because their increasingly dictatorial leader refused to recognize us as a sovereign nation.

Consequently, we had become accustomed to saying “Don’t worry” or “It’s okay” or “We aren’t blaming you” and then watching eyes glaze over as we explained the separation of powers in a constitutional monarchy, which means that Charles III is our head of state but not our head of government. Weirdly, nobody wanted to talk about Cardinal Robert Prevost, now Leo XIV, the Chicago-born, Spanish-speaking Augustinian who is the first American to be elected pope. Politics and religion don’t always mix, as my mother, a fervent Catholic, used to say.

♦

MY DOG, NOT SURPRISINGLY, HAS A BETTER SENSE of direction than I do, so I was happy to follow my husband’s lead across the Pont au Double for our first close-up of Notre-Dame. It had been in my consciousness since our arrival the day before, and now there it stood, majestic and pristine, the sun turning its limestone walls a delectable eggnog shade, the three western arches resplendent with sculpted figures, the spire once again a visible beacon in the sky. The rest of the building was shrouded in scaffolding, rigging, and hoarding as artisans continued to work on the new roof, replacing the one that had collapsed during the fire.

That was the first surprise: the inside of the mighty cathedral might have been finished, but the outside was still a work in progress. The second and bigger shock was the size of the serpentine crowds, which wove through a series of barriers on the right side of the huge public square west of the building and milled about along the length of one of its external walls. Before the fire, Notre-Dame had been a huge draw for tourists, but it was often ignored by Parisians in a secularizing society. Now, as in Hugo’s day, everybody wanted to visit, including us.

Entrance was free — it is a church, after all — but group and individual tickets were recommended to reduce wait times. Neither of us was keen on queuing for two or three hours, but we hadn’t come all this way to miss Notre-Dame, and if the best way to get inside was to attend mass, I was willing to swallow my lapsed Catholicism and sit quietly while the faithful took Communion.

My husband looked at me in astonishment when I proposed my plan, because he knows my views on organized religion. After weighing the options, he agreed. The bells were pealing when we returned early the next morning, chilly even for May. Feeling hungry brought back all the buried strictures from my youth: the gnawing in my stomach because we were forbidden to eat anything before Communion, a fast that began the previous midnight, and which always made me feel nauseated when the altar boy started swinging the incense burner to signal the Eucharist was nigh. Nowadays the rules are so lenient that fasting need last for only an hour, and seniors like us can stop for a breakfast sandwich on the way to church. Even so, we had both skipped coffee and croissants for an additional ten minutes of sleep.

The barriers were already in place in the Parvis de Notre-Dame as we joined the line forming for the 8 a.m. service. I stared at the two main towers, wishing I could get closer to their magnificent facades, but security guards weren’t letting anyone through other than a few visiting priests in long black robes and ski jackets, who had clearly come prepared for brisk weather.

As we waited, a clean-shaven American with a receding hairline, dressed in jeans and a puffy jacket, asked if we were in the line for mass. After I nodded yes, he said he lived in Birmingham, England, but was in Paris with a buddy to attend a football match and had come to the Île de la Cité because, like us, he thought going to mass would be a good way to tour the cathedral. He was surprised that so much remained to be done to the outside and worried especially about the health risks of replacing the roof with lead. Was historical authenticity worth using a known contaminant, he ventured. I reported the details I had read in a lengthy article in the *New York Times* about the precautions the design team had ordered, including masks, haz-mat suits, and showers at the beginning and end of shifts, and suggested with a shrug that we wouldn’t really know for another twenty years if, or when, diabolical symptoms started appearing. That didn’t seem to satisfy him, but he let the matter go as he rubbed his cold hands together, before shoving them into his pockets.

Another American, living in Europe, came up and asked the standard question: Is this the line for mass? She sounded as though she came from New England and had freshly tinted auburn hair that had been pulled back into a loose braid hanging below her shoulders. Just when I expected her to mention the T-word, she began explaining that she had worked as a docent at the cathedral when she had lived in Paris before the fire and launched into what

“There wasn’t even an altar railing covered in a white cloth, I realized with a start.”

she could remember of her spiel, identifying the bas-reliefs above the three portals and explaining that the one on the left was dedicated to Eve and the central one to Mary, the second Eve. You mean the good Eve? I blurted. This stopped her cold. She turned and stared at me and said, “If you say so.”

Her reaction stunned me. Silently, I wondered if, in my absence from the church, Eve had been exonerated from the ignominy of being the fallen woman who had caused her husband and family to be banished from the Garden of Eden, similarly to how Pope John XXIII convened Vatican II in the early 1960s to loosen the rules around Communion and confession. But I wasn’t there to interview her, so I listened attentively as she continued to explain what she could remember of the figures sculpted into the arches — a much more interesting conversation than the apologies for American-style demagoguery that we had already tired of hearing.

Finally a priest came out of the cathedral, ushered the visiting clerics inside, and opened the main wooden doors wide so that we could enter. The sounds of the refurbished organ swelled as we walked in and raised our eyes to the soaring walls and the three luminous rose windows. The architecture critic Rowan Moore, writing for the *Guardian*, said it best: “The effect is staggering. It takes the breath, stops the heart, catches the throat. The heat of the fire has been replaced by light, reverberating through repeating and intersecting lines and curves, the mouldings and tracery of gothic architecture.”

The result, he rightly concluded, is “a space that seems to glow.”

In the distance, past the rows of chairs, the new altar, with its blunt salad-bowl form, adds a deliberately modern element. Designed by the Parisian Guillaume Bardet, the liturgical furnishings, which include the baptismal font, lectern, and tabernacle, required several tons of bronze. They have offended some traditionalists. Indeed, the *National Catholic Register* in the U.S. has complained that for “a historic cathedral, resplendent with stained glass and stone vaulting paired with a \$760-million renovation, it is hard to reconcile the new furnishings as having a semblance of ‘noble beauty.’”

Personally, I’m okay with the abrupt juxtaposition of then and now, although I did find it odd that the surpliced priest who invited those of us attending mass to join him around the vaguely brutalist baptismal font was carrying a cellphone, which he consulted frequently, as he delivered a brief history of the cathedral, the terrible fire, and the reconstruction efforts. He was much more like a tour guide than the remote fathers speaking Latin that I remembered from decades earlier.

After he finished his presentation, he turned around and led the way to the altar, singing “Alleluia,” the hymn of praise to the Lord, as faithful worshippers joined in, including, to my surprise, the football fan I had recently befriended. He must have been an altar boy, I thought, listening to his resonant tenor as he responded to the priest’s incantations.

My acquaintances from the queue were not just curious tourists, like the lout who had pushed ahead of us to claim a seat in the first row of chairs and was busily holding his own cellphone aloft so he could photograph the freshly cleaned windows. They,

like so many others, were devout Catholics, I realized, as they crossed themselves and knelt in prayer on the hard footrests. I felt like an interloper as I quietly sat in my chair, surrounded by people who, like my long dead mother, believed that Jesus was a real person who had risen from the dead.

It was all coming back: finding my baptism certificate in the old steamer trunk in my parents’ bedroom that declared “father not present,” because in the vernacular of the time he was “too good” a Protestant to set foot in a Catholic church; missing the rehearsal for my First Communion because I had absentmindedly chewed a cookie before mass; the marital compromise that shifted my older sister and me to a public school in the days before Quebec’s Quiet Revolution, while still attending mass on Sundays with our mother. No longer being taught by nuns or studying religion as a curriculum subject had left me unable to comply with a priest’s command in the confessional to make a “good” act of contrition, a shame I carried along with the ridicule I experienced when an arrogant grade 6 teacher discovered my mixed religious background and demanded to know, in front of the class, why I wasn’t in the Catholic school where I belonged. Were the taxes too high? she inquired snidely, to which I could respond with only a bewildered shrug.

Religion has never brought me the peace, joy, or sense of belonging that the celebrants around me seemed to be feeling as they lined up for Communion. Even that was different from the

way I remembered kneeling down, pressing my hands together with my fingers pointed toward heaven, raising my face, closing my eyes, and opening my mouth as the priest placed the cardboard-tasting Host on my tongue.

There wasn't even an altar railing covered in a white cloth, I realized with a start. Some of the faithful knelt on the floor and put their hands together in prayer, closed their eyes, and opened their mouths, while others stood and held out a hand to receive the unleavened wafer, which they then put in their own mouths. Was it the pandemic and the fear of spreading germs that had caused this change? Or was it another democratization, like turning the altar around so that the priest faces the parishioners rather than having his back toward them? I had much to learn about the workings of the contemporary Church, but did I care enough to do the research? After all, I was here only to see the restoration.

After Communion, another bell interrupted my reverie, and suddenly people were standing, turning from one side to another, smiling and speaking to their neighbours — many of them strangers — as though they were greeting friends at a cocktail party. This congeniality was too much, especially so early in the morning.

I turned to my husband as a way of avoiding the person on the other side of me. I had wanted to be an anonymous observer, not part of a religious community. So why suggest going to mass, I chastised myself sternly, recognizing my hypocrisy and desperate for the rites to be over so I could walk around, look at the statues, admire the reliquary, and think about the Virgin Mary, who had managed to become pregnant without indulging in sex with Joseph. A bizarre feat, that so-called Immaculate Conception, and a behavioural mode that had indoctrinated generations of women into thinking that taking pleasure in sex was if not immoral, then at least unnatural. Maybe I should reread Marina Warner's classic 1976 treatise, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, I thought, or quiz the former docent on how Mary's role has changed, or not, over the centuries. But I abandoned that notion when I spotted her a couple of rows over, head bent, once again deep in prayer as she knelt on the hard footrest.

Instead, my husband and I wandered around in awe of the new cathedral created out of the ashes of the old one, retaining its medieval structures as it welcomed a rebirth. And then, realizing that we were starving, we walked to a nearby boulangerie for cappuccinos and croissants — and watched Parisians go about their lives.

I THOUGHT THAT VISIT WOULD BE THE END OF MY churchgoing, but two weeks later an old friend arrived in Paris — his favourite European city — and wanted to visit Notre-Dame. So back I went to morning mass. An Anglican, he had none of my hang-ups about crossing himself, genuflecting as we entered our row of chairs, kneeling on the footrests, or exchanging peace messages with strangers. He was embracing Catholic mass as an experience, not resisting it. I was astounded, but because he was comfortable, I could feel myself relaxing. The ritual was becoming more familiar, less threatening, and I realized my fears of divine retribution were softening as I was swept up in the voices singing around me and the communal dedication to a religion I had long abandoned. There might

be something about this going-to-mass thing, I thought. I can escape the hassles and demands of my ordinary life for an hour or so and soak myself in religious spirit in this beautifully resurrected cathedral.

So I went yet again — by myself. It was the day after the Throne Speech, in which Charles III had reminded us of the promise of Canada when his “dear late mother” opened Parliament in 1957 and urged us to be “clear-eyed” because “the world is a more dangerous and uncertain place than at any point since the Second World War.” Now is the time, he suggested, to take heart. “As the anthem reminds us: the True North is indeed strong and free!” Feeling chuffed about my country, I expected concurrence when I fell into conversation with an American woman as I lined up for the third time outside Notre-Dame. Not so. She told me she was from Florida and proudly boasted that she had been to mass seven days in a row. That certainly put my three visits in a month to shame. I should have known better, but I assumed once I told her where I was from, she would offer what by then was a standard apology for her president's outrageous behaviour, so I readied my “Don't worry” response.

“I am a big Donald Trump supporter,” she retorted. “We are learning how much money we have been wasting abroad,” she continued with an angry glint in her eye. I looked at her blankly, at least I hope so, but silently I demanded, “You mean by saving kids from starvation, providing medicine for HIV/AIDS patients in Africa, and complying with a free trade deal your hero signed with Canada?” I quickly changed the subject because the last thing I wanted was an argument about politics in this place.

“I gather a lot of Canadian snowbirds are selling their condos and moving back home,” I suggested, as an inept attempt to change the topic. “Yes,” she agreed, “but Florida is packed,” which I guess was a polite way of saying good riddance. “Our roads can't support all these people coming into the state,” she continued. “I hear that all the time at the country club.” Where was my Maple Leaf pin when I needed it?

Just then a mother-daughter duo showed up — finger- and toenails polished, makeup glistering, hair pouffed — and asked if this was the queue for mass. On hearing it was, the daughter struck a cheesecake pose so her mother could click a photo to send back home to the States.

“I don't speak French,” the daughter complained, but the Trump supporter had a solution for that too. There is an app called Hallow, which translates a homily as the priest is delivering it into the language of your choice. Apparently you can also use it to recite the rosary or to attend mass remotely.

How do you take Communion or make a confession on an app, I wondered? The absurdity of confessing to one's phone reminded me of a family barbecue decades earlier on a Sunday afternoon with some of my mother's distant relatives. Drink was being consumed, and one fellow with a paunch and a leer was behaving badly. My father sidled up to me and said in a low voice, “You know, they all went to mass this morning.”

At the time, I laughed. Now I felt empathy for all of us seeking a way to find meaning in our harried lives and prayed silently for mass to begin so I could escape my companions and, like so many others, find sanctuary in Notre-Dame. ▲



Levine is expert at conveying confusion and dislocation in a magic shorthand.
—Mark Anthony Jarman

Smith renders the self-obsessed urban landscape with absolute precision.
—Mark Kingwell

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Time

Twelve mournful days

Ruth Panofsky

SATURDAY AFTERNOON, JANUARY 18. I enter the care home, pull up a chair, and embrace my mother. She is unaware that time has passed since my last visit in late November. This is a gift, and I accept it.

My mother is ninety-six. She has vascular dementia. She's forgotten much of her past, but I reside in memory.

I was out of town over the holiday break, so we kept in touch over FaceTime. My mother appreciates these conversations. She brushes her short hair — to this day, she's a natural brunette — applies her signature red lipstick, and readies herself in front of the iPad.

On the screen, she becomes an altered person. Her smile is gentle, her eyes bright. She is open and kind. Complimentary. My mother is unfamiliar in this guise.

I am unnerved, but also grateful. For most of my life, she's not been tender.

I look forward to our FaceTime calls, even if I do most of the talking. I relate news, recount humorous anecdotes, and relish her laugh.

I feel beloved. That, too, is a gift I accept.

Sunday, January 19. I receive an email. There's an outbreak of pneumonia in the care home. My mother is sick.

I call the front desk and learn that she is isolated in her bedroom, with round-the-clock attendants. They suspect she has pneumonia, but can't be certain.

They have drawn blood and are awaiting the test results.

I telephone that evening. The caregiver hands the phone to my mother. Her voice is shaky, and she is confused. I am worried.

Monday, January 20. My middle sister — who holds the power of attorney — calls before 9 a.m.

It was not a good night. My mother took a turn for the worse. Her breathing is laboured and she's being transferred to hospital.

My sister's leaving for the hospital herself. She's already contacted my youngest sister, who will meet her there. Will I come?

I have a doctor's appointment that morning and will come afterwards.

I arrive before noon. My mother is in the emergency ward. She is dazed but aware that her three daughters are by her side.

I can't bear to see my mother affixed to a monitor and struggling to breathe. Over the past three years, even in decline, she's remained fiercely independent, in spirit if not in body.

There's a stiff chair against the antiseptic wall. I take a seat and contain my distress. My sisters hover near my mother. They punctuate my silence with intermittent moaning.



Closing scenes with estranged sisters.

We have a fraught kinship.

My youngest sister and I are estranged. She severed our relationship years ago. Of the three of us, she is most bound to my mother.

My middle sister and I have an on-again, off-again connection. These days, she is distant. Of the three of us, she is most responsible for my mother.

I am the eldest. Of the three of us, I am most careful of my mother.

Today my sisters are amiable. Another gift I accept.

I stay for several hours, then take my leave. I ask my middle sister to text me with news and thank her when she agrees.

Tuesday, January 21. She texts me in the morning. She'll be at the hospital all day. She's distraught, she adds. "I know," I write. I share her terrible sadness.

By afternoon, my mother has been transferred to a private room. I make my way there and find her looking much worse than yesterday. In bed, she appears slight and frail. She is not awake and seems close to death. Her lips parted, her mouth agape. I turn away in shock.

Just three days ago she was well.

I am uneasy around my sisters. I feel exposed, unaccustomed to being near them, proximate in a space both intimate and institutional. I know and fear their ire and hope to avoid conflict.

My middle sister — defiant, erratic, artistic — is childless.

My youngest sister — proud, forceful, and efficient — has a son and a daughter. Her daughter may be close in age to my own but is unfamiliar, our lives never having intersected. When she arrives and joins in the lamentation, I feel fully excluded from the family around me.

Toward evening, the palliative care doctor shows up to review my mother's prognosis. He addresses all three of us, but my middle sister takes charge. She decides to keep our mother on oxygen. Why, I ponder, but hold back.

My sister can be explosive, especially when restive. As a child, she was the target of my father's violent rage, which she has since restyled as her own.

My husband arrives soon after the doctor departs. We've been married for decades. He's my mother's first son-in-law and loves her. He glances at the figure in the bed and nearly breaks down.

He converses with my sisters, eases tension, as he's done in the past.

My husband and I leave the hospital together but drive home separately. In the car, I pray for my mother's release.

Wednesday, January 22. It's been taxing to watch my mother weaken and unsettling to be in the company of my sisters. I decide to return to the hospital in late afternoon, accompanied by my husband. I need his strength. My daughter meets us after work.

Eventually my sisters quit.

The three of us linger at my mother's side. I am temporarily free of siblings, without fear of strife or judgment.

The relief I feel is intense.

Over the years, my sisters tried to break the bond between me and my mother. They failed.

Thursday, January 23. My son flies in from Montreal. "She won't be cognizant," I caution him, but he longs to see his grandmother. He craves a proper parting.

It's late in the day when he turns up at the hospital. He is downcast but not startled at the sight of his grandmother. He's a doctor who treats many elderly patients.

My mother hasn't spoken or stirred since Monday. My son approaches the bed. "Bubbie," he speaks into her ear. Immediately, her eyelids flicker. She's recognized his voice. He takes her hand and continues.

He questions, jokes, and my mother's eyes open. He's reached her. He's brought her back.

My son is relieved. "You see," he utters, "she isn't gone yet. I was right to come."

"You were," I reply.

My sisters' disdain for me extends to my son. They are certain there is no fidelity between him and my mother. But they witness his effect on his dying grandmother and cannot deny their mutual attachment.

After dark, I text my middle sister. I tread ever so carefully. "Do you think it might be time to stop the oxygen? It's been days of watching her draw closer to death."

Her response surprises me. "Yes," she affirms, "tomorrow."

My sister is the decision maker, and I am her subject. Tonight she and I are in rare alignment.

Friday, January 24. At my sister's direction, the oxygen is removed first thing in the morning.

I take a seat farthest from my mother's bed. She is sinking, no longer my parent. It pains me to see her in this state of decay. I find it agonizing.

My sisters think I am harsh. "Come close," they say.

But they are so present. They dominate the space around my mother, stroking her forehead and hands. They are two keening women. I am my mother's daughter, too, I remind myself.

Still, I am dejected. There is no place for me here. My sisters have claimed every inch of the room for themselves. How long will this last?

It's been a trying week. I'm exhausted. Driving home, I envisage three sisters supporting one another as their mother lies fading in hospital.

I give in to fantasy.

Saturday, January 25. We visit as a family. My husband, my son and daughter, and I. The hospital corridors are eerily hushed.

My sisters and their partners are in my mother's room. My youngest sister's children are there, too. The group forms a unit around the bed.

When we enter, the circle is rent.

We acknowledge one another under great strain. My sisters are stony. Their spouses feign friendliness.

We feel like interlopers, intruders on this scene of devotees attending the dying.

Outside the room, three men chat.

Inside, three sisters clash. We enclose our mother, her moribund body.

My children are bereft. They are losing their grandmother and regret not knowing their cousins. "I understand," I say. The cost is incalculable.

At last, we bid everyone goodbye and walk slowly toward the elevator.

Sunday, January 26. I don't go to the hospital. I need a break.

Monday, January 27. I receive a telephone call just before 8 a.m. "Your mother has died," the overnight attendant tells me. She delivers this message with grace.

"She's gone," I cry out to my husband from the bedroom.

Instantly, I feel remorse. I should have visited yesterday. But the feeling dissipates quickly. I had been with her when she was well, when she was still my mother.

My sister calls. She's sobbing. "I'll meet you at the hospital," I promise.

My husband comes along. "You're not going by yourself," he insists. He knows what awaits.

My mother's body lies fully covered. My sisters lift the sheet. They want to see her face. I do not. I will remember her moving visage.

The funeral parlour attendants are delayed. It's hours before they appear to collect the body. When they do, they hand the memorial candle to me as the eldest daughter. I accept it and am overcome with grief.

My middle sister wants the candle. "I'm keeping it," I declare. This is my solitary assertion since my mother fell ill.

My mother's body is wheeled out of the room and into the hallway. She now lies under a blanket adorned with a Star of David. Over the blanket, I place my hands on hers. They are cold. I am conscious that this is the last time I will touch my mother.

I step aside. She is taken away. My sisters wail.

The body will be transported to Quebec for interment next to my father. My mother lived nearly all her life in Montreal. She spent her final three years in Toronto to be close to her daughters.

Tuesday, January 28. My husband, my daughter, and I fly to Montreal.

Blind Anecdotes

Dark road to a dirt house. Man struck twice by lightning under the same tree. Said I've lived this before.

The fish will soon rain from the sky and look the fence is broken just as before. A prophecy with no one to hear it. Said this place is dead anyway, all rot and complacency. Man looked up at the tree and saw the rafter he hung from. They will eat you horse and all he said. Hair standing up he knew the signs and the knowing would not save him.

She talks to spirits on Sundays. Can't sleep for the whispering of them. Wears her best dress to bathe in and slowly slips beneath yet another surface. Close her eyes look inside for something of value something of worth and come up empty palms to the ceiling. Goes up those winding stairs to ring the church bell and steps right off the ledge while she's at it. By the time the trumpets come in it will be a couple years too late.

When she woke in the morning he was already up staring at the ceiling. One hand behind his head the other holding a cigarette. Blowing a puff of smoke he said Could you do this forever? She looked at his profile in the soft filtered light that dusty hotel room with peeling yellow paint and held it all tight. I hope so she whispered. God I hope so.

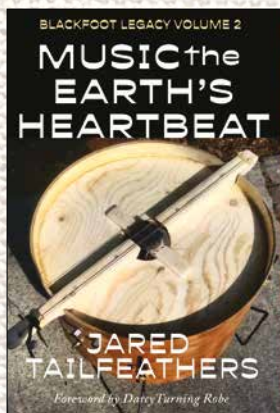
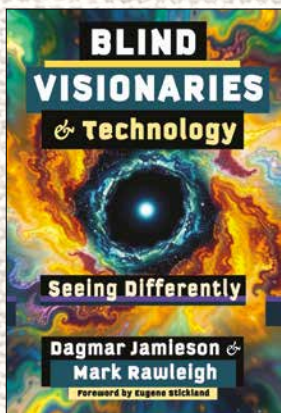
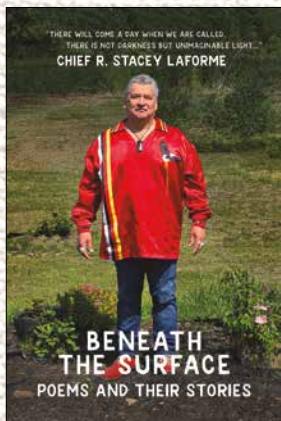
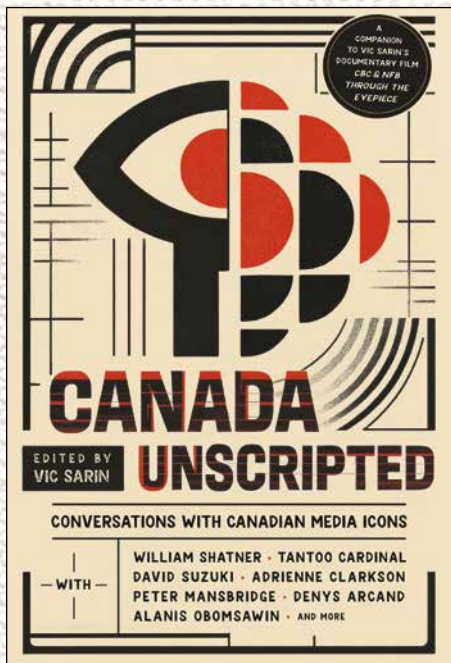
Erin Duffy

Erin Duffy is a Canadian writer living in Boston.



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CERTIFIED
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We three sisters check into the hotel nearest the funeral home. That afternoon, we have a telephone meeting with the rabbi who will conduct the service. He asks if we would like him to eulogize our mother. I feel emboldened to take the lead and respond, "Yes, I would."

He did not know her, so he solicits our memories. He poses questions — some more intrusive than others. Was she the type of mother you could approach with your problems? Was she forgiving? Was she charitable? What sort of marriage did your parents have? She lived solo for thirty years after the death of your father. How did she manage?

We talk candidly about our mother. But as we recall the joys and woes of our common past, my sisters seem more like strangers to me than like siblings. Years of discord divide us.

The rabbi is struck by our dissonant views of our mother and notes the unease that marks our exchange. My despair deepens.

That night, my son introduces us to his favourite restaurant in the city, and we savour a meal as a family.

Wednesday, January 29. The funeral is scheduled for noon. It's a frigid day and snow is expected, but I dress appropriately in leggings and fur. My memories of Montreal in the dead of winter are rekindled.

Two limousines pull up to the hotel entrance at eleven. My sisters and their families are ushered into the first car. The four of us enter the second.

At the funeral parlour, we are brought to a private antechamber, where family members and friends have already assembled. My mother's raised coffin is positioned at one end of the wide room. I sit at the opposite end on a sofa, alongside my husband and children.

I greet relatives and receive their condolences. One attendee wonders who I am. "The eldest daughter," I answer. I should have taken this query as a warning.

I glimpse my elderly uncle, my mother's sole surviving sibling. His distaste for me is long-standing, but I steel myself and say hello. He barely notices me. I should have heeded this snub, as well.

My sisters are aloof, but I am soothed by the gathering of people.

My daughter approaches my middle sister to proffer solace. "I'm really sorry about Bubbie," she says. "Are you?" she receives in turn, the two words serving as cudgel.

She once was a favoured niece. But today — despite their joint calling as hairstylists — there is no trace of my sister's past affection.

We are led into the chapel, where we sit apart from my sisters. At the podium, my son commemorates his grandmother. He speaks lovingly of a woman who delighted in her first grandchild. My middle sister heckles him from her seat in the front row. Her insistent assault on my children tears at me.

I am growing numb.

Some people follow us in private vehicles to the cemetery. The snowdrifts hamper our progress toward my father's headstone, where a grave has been dug.

Prayers are said as I stand in solemn thought. Beside me are my husband and children. My mother is lowered into the ground next to my father. As per custom, I shovel earth onto her coffin.

I shiver and sigh in anguish and shame, deploring the demise of a mother who did so little to unite her daughters.

Then the mourners exit the cemetery in procession. I am now a mourner.

The burial marks the return of my mother to the city that held her life. The finality hits me hard.

Wednesday afternoon, January 29. We sit shiva in Montreal West, at the home of my aunt, the widow of my father's only sibling. In life, my aunt and my mother were companions. I, too, feel warmly toward my aunt and thank her for generously opening her door to family and friends. Her genial smile is a tonic.

We shed boots and coats, then congregate in the dining room for a late lunch. My hunger surprises me.

With my blessing, my children depart to spend time together. My husband and I retreat to an upstairs bedroom. We need quiet and rest.

We descend in time for a light supper. My sisters and uncle dominate the conversation.

Wednesday evening, January 29. The rabbi is scheduled to attend the shiva at seven-thirty to lead the evening prayers. I admire him, an attentive man without pretension. His comments at the funeral had brought my mother to life.

I am looking forward to seeing him this evening, to participating in the prayer service.

My husband and I sit on the couch, tucked tightly into a corner.

My middle sister glares and suddenly directs me to take one of the low chairs designated for mourners. "Give your seat to my friends," she hisses. "You're so disrespectful."

I divert my gaze to face my husband. She darkens further.

Over three minutes, insults pile up, forming a chorus of public torment. "She's always been heartless," my youngest sister proclaims, as if to an audience. "You're a disgrace to your mother's memory," my uncle spits out.

My middle sister is seized by a long-held loathing, now furiously unleashed. "Leave. Leave. Leave," she chants, her wild, venomous roar ordering me out of the living room and out of the family.

I sit transfixed. I recognize the performance, this time directed at me alone.

I am finally frozen.

Then, abrupt silence. No one says a word. No one intervenes.

This afternoon, surrounded by family, I stood graveside. Tonight, cut off and newly forsaken, I turn inward. I long to say the Mourner's Kaddish for my mother. And when the rabbi arrives ten minutes later, with his words of comfort, I do just that.

I rise with the others and softly intone, "Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'meih raba."

I seek to absolve my mother. I seek to renounce my sisters. I seek faith in myself. I seek meaning in cataclysmic loss.

Life

A journalist's account of Alzheimer's

Bryn Evans

Living with Dementia: The Collected Columns of Darce Fardy

Darce Fardy

Nimbus Publishing

248 pages, softcover and ebook

DEMENTIA IS A FRIGHTENING word. It conjures the thought of our mental processes breaking down and the complete loss of everything we know.

Although Alexander Pope wrote of the “eternal sunshine of the spotless mind,” for many people suffering from neurodegenerative diseases and for their caregivers, the diagnosis brings profound fear of a loss of autonomy. As millions of baby boomers enter their seventies and eighties, our health care system will have to adapt and expand the way it supports seniors through memory-related illnesses.

Beyond the science and statistics, argued the journalist Darce Fardy, the stories of those who experience dementia are essential to understanding its complexity. Fardy was a seasoned reporter for the CBC: his nearly forty-year career there spanned programs like *The Fifth Estate*, *The Journal*, and *Marketplace*. After retiring in 1991, he served as the review officer under Nova Scotia's Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. In 2006, he founded the Right to Know Coalition, with the aim of increasing public access to government information. In 2013, at eighty-one, Fardy was diagnosed with the most common form of dementia, Alzheimer's. *Living with Dementia* collects more than six years of his columns for the *Halifax Chronicle Herald* in which he documented the progression of the disease until 2020. He died in 2022.

Fardy wrote like a true journalist. He didn't bury the lead, rarely used metaphor, and rendered his thoughts in short and punchy sentences. In 2017, while describing the onset of unsteadiness, he casually synthesized a serious fall into one sentence: “I went out for carrots and got home with a broken shoulder.” Some entries probe the cognitive aspects of his experience, like “How Dementia Handles Me,” while others explore questions of policy: “Parliament Should Consult Canadians on End of Life.” Many are full of existential humour and curiosity, like “I Can't Remember My Address, but I Can Dance.” Between self-deprecating jokes and thoughtful sociological inquiries, Fardy let in real grief and emotion, particularly when it came to the impact on his family. “Recently, Dorothea was listening to the radio when I interrupted,” he said, recalling a moment with his wife. “She was distracted from the interview, but I told her I would tell her later. ‘No,’ she said. ‘You'll forget.’”



The CBC reporter chronicled his disease for more than six years.

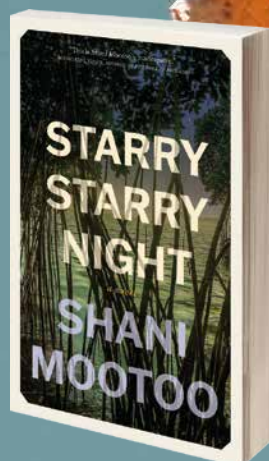
This collection can be analyzed closely, to track the development of his symptoms. The repetition of some details throughout, along with his changing voice and dwindling patience, acts as a kind of meta-commentary. Readers can also dip in and out of these columns, much as they would have if they had encountered them in a daily newspaper. Fardy's prose in the later ones feels stilted, reflecting his deteriorating condition toward the end. Picking up on a wishfulness in his many positive self-assurances, it's difficult not to wonder about his deeper worries. There are passages where his optimism, understandably, faltered. “I think I have lived too long,” he wrote in February 2018. “The last four years have brought on arthritis as well as advanced dementia. My parents didn't live that long, and I don't remember them dealing with the problems I am.” But in his final (and previously unpublished) column, penned in July 2020, he concluded, “I think readers will agree that while there is no cure for dementia, there is little reason I should be depressed.”

He attributed much of his equanimity over the years to his marriage. “In idle moments, and there are many, I fake it that I am doing some deep thinking,” he admitted. “Doesn't fool Dorothea. She is, after all, my memory.” The couple met in 1954 and were wed four years later. In a CBC interview in 2014, Dorothea shared that she first became concerned about her husband when he bumped into a long-time colleague at the airport and acted as though he were a stranger. Readers will sense that

she was much more than his memory; Fardy mentioned her often, always as a confidante, friend, and caregiver. “Without Dorothea,” he wrote, “I would be depressed twenty-four hours a day.”

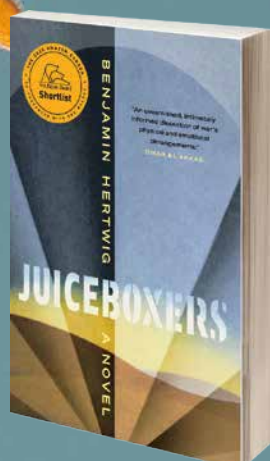
In addition to Fardy's writing, *Living with Dementia* features an introduction and an epilogue by his son, Peter. The volume also includes companion pieces by the geriatrician Kenneth Rockwood, who got to know Fardy through his research at Dalhousie University and was often published alongside him in the *Chronicle Herald*. Rockwood emphasizes that our knowledge of the brain is still limited and that these diseases demand increased awareness. He called Fardy's writing a “public service” and encouraged others to “follow his lead.” Similarly, an accolade from the Alzheimer Society of Nova Scotia declares, “Darce Fardy made a major contribution to health care.”

Like Fardy's columns, our lives are an accumulation of mundane details and facts. If we base our sense of identity on our familiarity with these small components, dementia can feel like a complete loss of self. Although brimming with harrowing details, Fardy's insights are comforting. His narrative illustrates that we are more than what we remember at any given time and, in doing so, challenges the shame often associated with the illness. “I hope I've made it clear that I don't see myself as a victim or a hero,” he wrote in 2014. That early intention comes through plainly in this wholesome and brave account. ▲



"This is Shani Mootoo's masterpiece."
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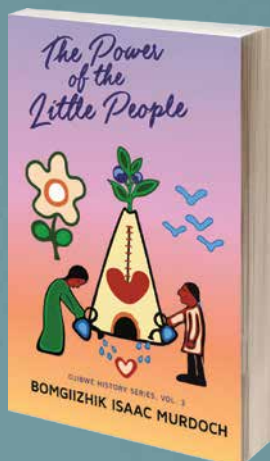
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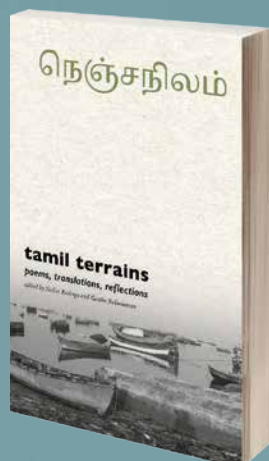
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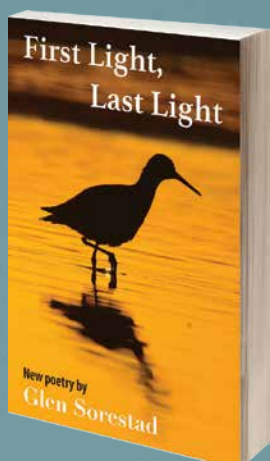
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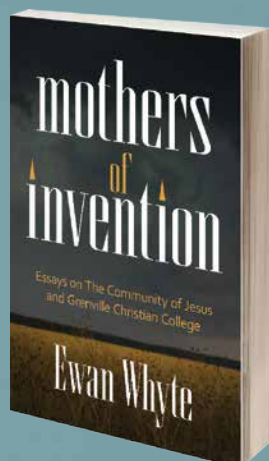
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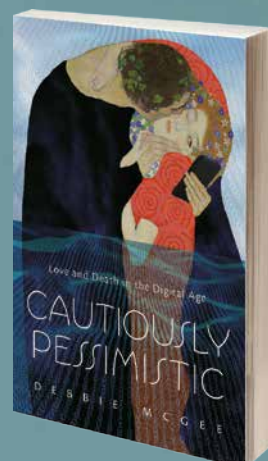
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The Critic

Harry Malcolmson revisits the '60s

Keith Garebian

Scene: How the 1960s Transformed Canadian Art

Harry Malcolmson

Aevo UTP

288 pages, hardcover and ebook

LONG RETIRED FROM LAW, ART JOURNALISM, and the collection of painting, sculpture, and photography, Harry Malcolmson feels an obligation to Canadian artists of the 1960s, a period when patriotism reached an apex with Expo 67. It was a time of economic prosperity and new-found freedom from Anglo-Saxon puritanism and established religion.

Toronto, where Malcolmson lives, had taken to the arts to demonstrate its modernism, helped in a significant degree by Jewish dealers and gallerists. Between 1950 and 1960, there were only two private galleries, the Laing and the Roberts, but by the mid-'60s, eight were in operation. The British bias in painting and sculpture was losing some force, and even the Group of Seven was becoming passé to many contemporary artists and critics. The gallerist David Mirvish, the painter Jack Bush, and the critic Clement Greenberg further accelerated change by promoting leading contemporary New York artists. Malcolmson — who began writing about art for the *Toronto Telegram*, the *Toronto Star*, and *Saturday Night* while studying law — was at the forefront of the new milieu, bent on smashing what some perceived to be “a conspiracy of silence” against artists in Canada.

Although it is far from perfect, *Scene: How the 1960s Transformed Canadian Art* adds to Malcolmson's service, especially if you ask those who read it prior to publication. Its jacket boasts blurbs from such eminences as Michael Parke-Taylor (once the curator of modern art at the Art Gallery of Ontario), Matthew Teitelbaum (formerly of the AGO and now the director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), Roald Nasgaard (of Florida State University), and Sara Angel (the founder of the Art Canada Institute and a member of this magazine's board of directors). Inside, the opening page is full of additional praise: “a truly great read” (the photographer Edward Burtnysky); “at once very personal yet almost encyclopedic in scope, quirky yet astonishingly insightful” (the general director of Koffler Arts, Matthew Jocelyn); “engaging and highly personal” (Stephan Jost, the current head of the AGO); “surprising, informative, and delightfully opinionated” (the University of British Columbia art historian John O'Brian); and “essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the dynamics of thriving art ecosystems” (Janne Sirén, of the

Buffalo AKG Art Museum). Such impressively effusive encomiums could be a stratagem — but for what? To forestall and disarm negative criticism? Or to generously bruit the primary text?

I began to read, fearing from a quick scan of the illustrations that visual aesthetic intercourse would be disappointing, even though Malcolmson had lived through the period he was describing. Apart from ten tables, there are only thirty-six illustrations spread over 253 pages of what is essentially an insider memoir brimming more with gossip, chit-chat, and anecdote than with what I would consider criticism. The colour illustrations are chiefly muddy in look, and of the three dozen, only twenty-two



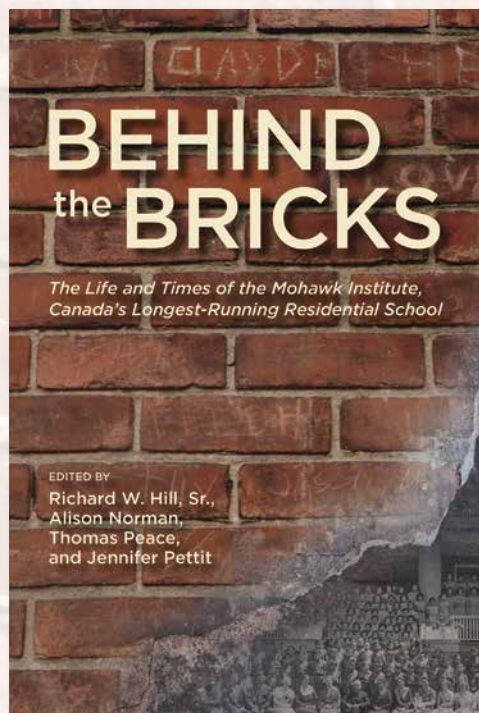
The young acolyte Harry Malcolmson.

are reproductions of paintings or sculptures. The others include such miscellany as pictures of friends, the author's old newspaper byline photo, Carmen Lamanna's ostentatious signature (though this looks like art in its own right), Harold Town in a fur coat, a gallery bulletin, and a Venice Biennale protest. The cited works near the end are a mix of the good and the dumbfounding, including reputable art critics and columnists (Ian C. Ferguson, Lee Johnson, Elizabeth Kilbourn, Sarah Milroy, and Robert Fulford among them) but no fewer than seven Wikipedia articles, which are not the lowest rung of the critical ladder but are pretty far down, given the frequency of misinformation or partial information they can contain.

But I read on, respecting the author for his lengthy, conscientious career while regretting much of the content. In his foreword, the museum executive Marc Mayer dutifully praises Malcolmson's “clear, lean, and engaging writing style,” which uses “accessible language free of alienating insider-isms.” Malcolmson, we are told, “bears cultural witness directly, unfiltered by anything more than his engaging personality and intelligence. He has a prodigious memory for the things he has seen, for the people who made them, and for those who made art their business.” I am all for such engagement, exempt from academic dry rot or extravagant pronouncements, but I am not so sure about the “unfiltered” part. No one is a tabula rasa, certainly not when it comes to opining about art. Malcolmson, now in his early nineties, does have an engaging personality, but his memory sometimes slips — as is usually the case with age — and his anecdotes, while not uninteresting, are often beside the point.

That said, Malcolmson's informal discourses and revelations can be pleasant — rather like cozy fireside chats in inclement weather. And he does help readers see how gallerists, artists, and curators helped turn boringly conservative Toronto into a hub of artistic experimentation. While Malcolmson acknowledges that a lot of the art and some of the artists have not stood the test of time — though great talents did emerge, Alex Colville and Michael Snow among them — he wears his heart on his sleeve for the likes of Les Levine, Iain Baxter, and Jack Bush. In some of his strongest pages, he celebrates the curators Doris Shadbolt and Jean Boggs, but, overall, *Scene* has a piecemeal structure as it covers “the most important decade in Canada's art history,” when the AGO and the National Gallery of Canada transitioned from “parochial shells to internationally respected institutions.”

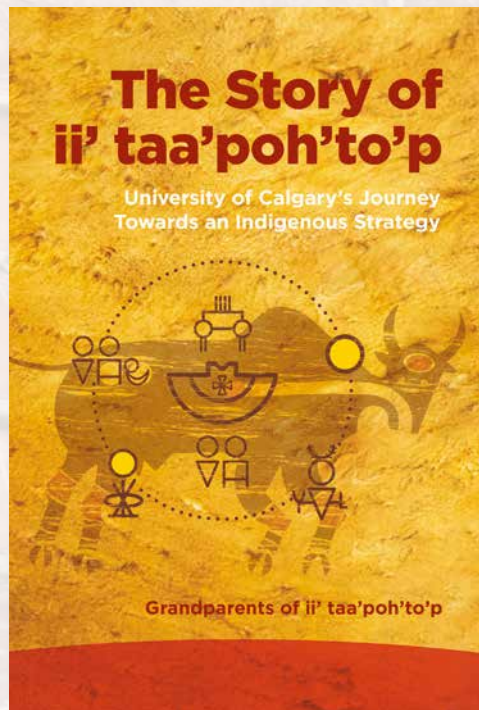
Malcolmson does show how Montreal and Vancouver differed from Toronto and Ottawa. Montreal was distinctly French and intellectual with its Plasticiens (Guido Molinari, Yves Gaucher, and Jacques Hurtubise, for example) and Automatistes (Paul-Émile Borduas, Marcel Barbeau, Roger Fauteux, and Jean Paul Riopelle, in particular), while Vancouver had no pop art and little sculpture until Shadbolt's *Los Angeles 6* exhibition (featuring Robert Irwin, John McCracken, Larry Bell, Ron Davis, Edward Kienholz, and Craig Kauffman), which shifted the “stylistic tectonic plates.” This chapter contains some of Malcolmson's best analysis, as he describes Bell's ten-foot glass panels, glazed and polished to astonishing transparency in order to “dematerialize his art and reduce its density virtually to zero”; Kauffman's vacuum-formed coloured plastic hangings; Davis's use



BEHIND THE BRICKS: The Life and Times of the Mohawk Institute, Canada's Longest-Running Residential School

From the outside, the Mohawk Institute looks like a welcoming school building. Look behind the bricks and a different story appears. This is a thorough, thoughtful history of Canada's first, and longest-running, residential school, bringing together Indigenous and non-Indigenous experts. *Behind the Bricks* provides a window into the past, not only

of the Mohawk Institute, but of the entire residential school system, with the goal of working towards a future of truth and reconciliation.



THE STORY OF II' TAA'POH'TO'P: University of Calgary's Journey Towards an Indigenous Strategy

The University of Calgary's Indigenous strategy, ii'taa'poh'to'p, lays the path for a journey of transformation and renewal for truth and reconciliation through ways of knowing, doing, connecting, and being. This book captures powerful and emotional stories that emphasize the importance of reconciliation and decolonizing

organizations. It demonstrates that trusting relationships can be developed between Indigenous and non-Indigenous relatives and lays out a dynamic framework and approach for the development of an Indigenous strategy.

of light as if it were on his palette; and Irwin's "structural intellectualism," where painting is metaphorically dissolved onto wall space.

Elsewhere, Malcolmson writes of influential dealers, including Carmen Lamanna from Italy (who promoted David Bolduc, Paterson Ewen, and the collective General Idea); Jerrold Morris from England (who featured international artists such as Karel Appel, José Luis Cuevas, and Isamu Noguchi); Av Isaacs (who devoted space to William Kurelek, Michael Snow, and Christiane Pflug); Walter Moos (who exhibited Bush, Borduas, Greg Curnoe, and numerous European painters and sculptors); Dorothy Cameron (who featured Rita Letendre and Robert Markle, whose nudes led to a criminal conviction and the end of Cameron's gallery); and David Mirvish (who championed Frank Stella, Helen Frankenthaler, and others from New York).

But what bedevils even these sections is what I would call Malcolmson's "listosis." He is an effective advocate for his favourites, yet he allows personality to dominate his considerations. At times, his descriptions or analyses are paper-thin. His approval of Ewen, for example, is largely inconsequential, and he adds but a whit to what we already know about Snow. Some of his enthusiasms sound like wrong-headed appreciations ("classic Wieland — intense patriotism rendered in whimsical form") or like gushes, as when he calls Baxter "one of the great artists of the era," despite also describing one of his gimmick-ridden exhibitions as "un-art-like." There is little value in his profile of the pre-eminent magazine illustrator Oscar Cahén, which ends fancifully: "Had he lived, it is probable that Cahén's green shoots would have blossomed into a distinctive Toronto style." Or maybe not? He quotes Teitelbaum on Richard Gorman ("a great lyrical painter in every phase") as well as Milroy on the same artist ("a tour de force of trowelled-on pigment that collapses under the weight of its own glorious excess") without showing which view has more aesthetic validity. And he does not or cannot offer a counterpoint to Milroy's demolition of Markle: "a slobbering dinosaur from the swamps of misogyny."

Malcolmson is less reticent when it comes to Town. Instead of offering aesthetic critique, he bears down with all guns blazing, berating the artist for his "compulsive need to control" and a "preening, constructed persona" that obscured "an insecure, angst-driven personality."

By contrast, the "painting pragmatist" Bush receives an incisive critical appreciation, though it originally appeared in 1966:

He will suggest an enclosed rectangle, a straight line, an evenly painted area. Just as the effect is about to be completed, he backs away, takes something off. His rectangles don't close, the lines are never sharp and true, and the colors never have an even intensity. What Bush wants in a painting is a firmly constructed, but non-doctrinaire look. To achieve this look of informality, he blurs the edges between colors and allows raw canvas to show through thinly painted areas.

I wish more of this book were as insightful as these lines, but the truth is that *Scene's* best quality is its author's general heartfelt motivation, not its structure or technique.

Rolling Stone

Caitlin Galway moves around

Stacey May Fowles

A Song for Wildcats

Caitlin Galway

Dundurn Press

240 pages, softcover and ebook

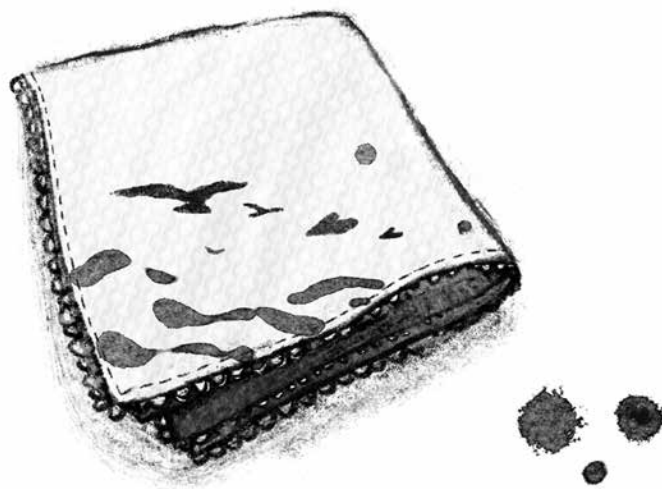
IN THE TITLE STORY OF *A SONG FOR WILDCATS*, two young men, Felix and Alfie, take a boat to go birdwatching at an archipelago just off the coast of Corsica. Having spent the afternoon together in a lush floral landscape, the near strangers settle onto the rocky shore to share a spliff and embark on a ponderous discussion about the nature of love.

With his legs drawn up and his elbows propped on his knees, Felix contemplates. "I think love is like kindness," he says, "like how you can carry out an act that embodies kindness without it genuinely coming from a place of empathy and altruism. Maybe it's, you know, ego using an act of kindness as a vehicle to satisfy itself." Alfie, the narrator, responds, "I had love back at school." Then he describes it as feeling "like someone knew where all the bruises were and how hard to press."

This heartbreaking combination of the visceral and the emotional is the hallmark of Caitlin Galway's first collection of short fiction. Through five substantial stories, the reader is introduced to varied depictions of love in the face of trauma, the often marred and blood-soaked imagery mirroring the rawness of the book's painful subject matter.

In the opening story, Felix and Alfie try to navigate their increasingly fraught intellectual and physical connection — and the lingering ramifications of prior abuse and desire — in the shadow of student unrest. "The Islanders" introduces readers to eleven-year-old Jamie, a troubled Irish orphan who is plagued by visions and destructive impulses while struggling to connect with his aunt and new guardian, Lydia. The closing story, "The Lyrebird's Bell," offers a common yet no less searing portrayal of two adolescent British girls against the world, their infatuation blossoming despite their families' differences. "As I faced her, our foreheads touched," Elizabeth says of Annabelle. "My bed was too small, meant for a child half my age, with delicate white trim like cake fondant and a headboard patterned with black-and-gold bees. To fit we had to overlap our arms, let our skin stick together, tangle our raw-boned legs."

The author of *Bonavere Howl*, a novel from 2019, Galway writes with sumptuous, gothic prose — each line expertly crafted, each description a gut punch, each character a powerful mix of world-weary, broken, and defiant. These stories find themselves somewhere between dream



A debut collection that artfully combines the visceral and the emotional.

and nightmare, their interpersonal dynamics possessing a threatening quality even when they are explicitly loving.

Toward the end of "The Lyrebird's Bell," Elizabeth helps tend to Annabelle's self-inflicted bloody nose. "If I tell my mother she did it when she was drunk, she'll behave for a while," Annabelle explains, ominously, while pressing a tea towel to her face. Elizabeth reflects on their relationship, describing it as "perversely private, both a sacred and shameful secret." Galway brings a visual elegance to the intimacy and physical brutality of the scene. "The bleeding eventually stopped, though Annabelle kept a bud of tissue up one of her nostrils," Elizabeth recalls. "A bruise formed over her nose and winged beneath her eyes. It looked like a purple watercolour of a bird taking flight."

The volume is also marked by the author's effortless ability to traverse time periods and geography. She conjures believable portraits of places and eras, whether it is postwar Australia, the 1968 French student protests, or the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The link between these diverse plots always lies in the strength of the feelings between people that Galway is able to evoke. "The brush of his fingers still clung to my skin," Alfie says of Felix's touch, for example. "Clean and cool and eviscerating, like drops of bleach." Detailed memories and thoughts contribute to this immediacy. "Had she tried to break off those radical pieces of herself like rib bones she could bury out of sight?" Lydia wonders about her sister, Jamie's mother. "Had

the bloodhounds, with their noses for vulnerability, dug up those bones and brought them back to her?"

In these pages, the mundane becomes a spectacular, transcendent event. When Annabelle bites into a plum, the sound of each "toothy squelch" brings up the image of her mother "jarring them in syrup to turn into jam, the alchemy of sweetening the unpalatable." When Jamie accidentally breaks a jar of shells in front of Lydia, it sounds like "a glassy shriek" and leaves "a wreckage of broken scallop shells and glittering bits of amber glass like scattered fish eggs."

As haunting and ethereal as it is gritty and raw, Galway's voice is singular, able to tackle wide-ranging locales, eras, and sensations, while repeatedly pushing readers deep into the discomforts of human behaviour. Alfie's poignant reflections on the existential pain of love are a case in point: "I want an experience of the world that's iridescent and unfixed. A pure, beautiful life. And love diminishes that — at least when it attaches itself to me. It's depleting. It's poisonous."

A Song for Wildcats offers up moments of loss, longing, grief, obsession, madness, and violence, each crafted with extraordinary beauty and care. The result is jarring, but the emotions, however extreme, will resonate with most. With philosophical insight, Galway has built a gilded universe as gorgeous as it is horrific, as grounded as it is alien, mixing the brutal with the exquisite to extraordinary effect. ▲

Vanity Fair

Two novels on performance and delusion

Sam White

She's a Lamb!

Meredith Hambrock

ECW Press

312 pages, softcover, ebook, and audiobook

You Crushed It

Jean-Philippe Baril Guérard

Translated by Neil Smith

Book*hug Press

278 pages, softcover and ebook

DEEP DOWN, ASPIRING ARTISTS know that success relies on a certain amount of self-deception: a belief in one's gift even when opportunity fails to knock. If years go by without any big breaks, most will allow this lofty hope to yield to the heavy weight of reality. Maybe a creative pursuit is better as a hobby than as a vocation.

In *She's a Lamb!*, Meredith Hambrock satirizes what happens when a pipe dream hardens into an unshakable faith in one's talent. Despite all evidence to the contrary, a wannabe musical theatre star is sure of her destiny. What might she resort to for a role—especially if she hates the philistines who refuse to see her genius and the gatekeepers who pass over her? Actors usually mean the line “I’d kill to get that part” figuratively. Not this actor.

Jessamyn St. Germain, twenty-six, moonlights as an usher at the Franklin, a suffering mid-size theatre in Vancouver, booking the occasional commercial while she dreams about a Tony Award. Perhaps because she's conventionally attractive and extroverted, her life is full of horrible men with “bottomless desire.” As she puts it, “I am everything most men have ever wanted, and they never let me forget it. It's absolutely exhausting.” There's the patron with an oxygen tank who gropes her in front of an assembling crowd. Then there are her two unfulfilling situationships: Anton, a needy and obsessive man-child with a disgusting basement apartment who has been “stuck in his Ph.D. for seven years,” and Vishal, an emotionally unavailable businessman who, despite being little more than an “after-hours transaction,” wants to make her a stay-at-home mom. In the span of a few weeks, both men ask her to move in with them. That's when Jess comes to a realization: “Who I am doesn't really matter at all, as long as I am hot enough.”

Then her employer decides to mount *The Sound of Music* as a Hail Mary in hopes of increasing attendance, and Jess auditions for the role of Maria, seeing it as her last chance at stardom. “The part should be mine,” she thinks. “It has to be mine.” When the director, Michelle, summons her for a meeting, Jess assumes the



Is an artist's pipe dream enough to save the show?

best. At this point, the reader may already be suspicious that her confidence is out of proportion. It's no surprise then that Michelle gives the lead to Samantha Nguyen, Jess's extremely online nemesis. To add insult to injury, Michelle asks Jess to be the “childminder,” to sit in on the rehearsals and ensure the kid actors “get through the production.” Jess agrees reluctantly but becomes convinced that if she learns the lines for Maria anyway, fate will pull her from the shadows and into the spotlight.

Hambrock gets a lot of comedic mileage and dramatic irony out of her narrator's delusions of grandeur. During rehearsals, Jess views every interaction or production setback as her chance to seize the part. Negative thoughts bubble up from underneath her various schemes. She fantasizes about suffocating the director, throwing herself into the ocean, and thrusting a misbehaving child's braid into a paper shredder. Her commitment to performance takes on a religious, almost messianic tone. She fancies herself “in the business of fixing the soul of this rotten country, of telling stories that reach down your throat and show you the light.” Jess's conviction drives her to steal what she views as rightfully hers. She shoves Samantha off a pier, spraining the lead's ankle in the process. Jess deceives herself into thinking that she didn't intentionally hurt her. “She wasn't pushed. She fell,” she thinks. “If I say it enough times, we'll all believe it.”

Jess stops doing side gigs and paying her rent, focusing on her increasingly sinister effort to play Maria. As opening night nears, Hambrock

continually raises the stakes. Jess's estranged father is sure to be in attendance, the company approaches bankruptcy, and Michelle announces a terminal cancer diagnosis. How far does Jess have to go to step into the lead role and, in her eyes, save the production?

Hambrock's background as a screenwriter comes through in *She's a Lamb!* While intricately plotted, it has the pace and verve of a prestige comedy. Its characters aren't quite types, but they're recognizable: Samantha, the pick-me princess who knows how to play the game; Anton, the hygiene-challenged burnout who would do anything for a woman out of his league; Michelle, the babbling, stressed-out creative with “an entire city of soy sauce-stained Styrofoam towers” collecting behind her desk. Beneath Hambrock's light touch and disturbing humour are sharp insights into the mental costs of ambition, especially for women. By the time Jess finally takes the stage, she wants to kill the part of herself that loves to perform. She opens her mouth, and we realize that her singing voice has been awful all along.

In a novel that verges into gruesome horror, the biggest jump scare comes at the end, when Jess is forced to ask herself, What if I'm as untalented as I've always feared?

SHE'S A LAMB! MAPS THE UNRAVELLING OF A FAILING actor, while Jean-Philippe Baril Guérard's *You Crushed It* charts a performer's meteoric rise. Translated by Neil Smith, it's just as acerbic in its depictions of the toll of artistic striving.

Raph Massi is a struggling stand-up comic in Quebec, the kind of guy who was a bullied “poster boy for incels” in high school and needs two beers before getting on stage. At a party, he has a meet-cute with Laurie, another young comedian, who works for an influential manager instead of pursuing her own material. Amid their flirtation, Laurie reveals that she is clairvoyant. Raph wants her to prove it. She hesitates, feeling a profound sadness, before showing that it’s true.

From then on, *You Crushed It* is told in the second person from Laurie’s perspective. She spends the next 200 or so pages unfurling the story of the rest of Raph’s life. She outlines the sex they’ll have that night — “I won’t cum, but you won’t realize it” — and their eventual relationship. She recounts the trips they will take together and reveals their compulsive collaborative process: “Take a Ritalin, reread with a clear head everything we wrote the day before, brainstorm, take notes, eat, fuck, joke around, rewrite, drink, chill, get a brilliant idea.” Laurie will co-write Raph’s first one-man show and kick-start his stalled career. Eventually she will fall out of love and dump him just as his star is rising. This devastating end will lead him into a years-long spiral of substance abuse, bitterness, and professional acrimony.

Initially, this choice of narrative perspective seems gimmicky and distracting, but Baril Guérard infuses the prophecy of Raph’s journey with such propulsive energy that it’s hard not to turn the pages (or inhale this satisfying book in one sitting, as I did). There’s a real thrill in the burgeoning romance and in watching Laurie spur Raph creatively, which makes the inevitable hangover all the more brutal. Early in the novel, Raph photographs Laurie the morning after a druggy trip to a nightclub in Berlin. “You’ll never delete that photo,” she predicts. “At first, you’ll look at it because you miss the girl in the picture. Later, you’ll look at it because you miss the person who took the photo.”

Baril Guérard is exacting in his dissection of Raph’s fragile ego. Through radio hits, awards, and touring, Raph still can’t get over Laurie. Whenever she appears in the periphery of his world, he lapses into self-sabotage. He drinks too much, makes scenes, ruins friendships, gets sober, starts boozing again. None of it loosens his stranglehold on Quebec’s comedy industry. Surprisingly for a novel about comedians, Raph’s jokes — and their uproarious reception — don’t always quite land, especially when his despair pushes his material into dark places. At least in English, one gets the sense that Baril Guérard is less interested in rendering the humour onstage (and making his readers laugh) than in capturing the pain that makes it possible.

◆
WHERE *SHE’S A LAMB!* CAPTURES THE AGONY OF failure, *You Crushed It* maps the self-destruction that can underpin creative success. As Laurie tells Raph, “Your career would never end up taking off if you liked yourself.” Both books put readers in a position of exquisite discomfort as they watch what it takes for artists to put it all out there. One performer’s relentlessly oversized ego ushers her into a very public humiliation, while the other’s self-hatred leads him to stardom.

Both extreme stories feel true. So what does that say about those of us in the audience, demanding to be entertained? ▲

Elegy for Richard

Around the reservoir the banks rewild
Like a fire sheared them bare, and not
Excavation under blade and bucket.
Almost accurate, the way the earth,
Thick with milkweed and thistle, wild rye,
Follows an overpitched slope down to the water.
A tendrilled mesh of roots holds it in place
And stops the topsoil from slipping down
To sink beneath the surface and become
The cold, dark sediment it was before
We dug it up and heaped it in a vessel.
Down below, blackbirds trill the tasselled
Grasses standing shin-deep in the shallows
And a heron stalks the shapes that flicker
Through the crystal eye of its own shadow.
The water’s low. It’s August. One must wonder
What it would be like to live without
This irritable reaching after figures
Trying to apprehend the exact moment
The humming alchemy of dew and golden
Sunlight turns to lead in a leggy stem.
In the darkest day’s darkest hour
I’ll be dreaming still of ample August
And the fear I felt, rounding the bend
By the woodlot where the twisted willow
Splits the treeline into *here* and *there*,
All the fields adrift with swaying spines
Bent under bloom and butterfly, bees
Bobbing on the burden of their engines,
Heavy as the ivory effervescence
Doubling over the yarrow: intricate lobes
Dense as clustered ventricles, the blue
Embroidery of lung, the lopsided
Plexus of the liver, and the looming
Bank of thunderheads about to break
And knock the laden blossoms from their tethers.

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The Knot

A postmodern caper by Maria Reva

André Forget

Endling

Maria Reva

Alfred A. Knopf Canada

352 pages, hardcover, ebook, and audiobook

EARLY MORNING, FEBRUARY 24, 2022. A white RV leaves Kyiv. In the cab are three women: Anastasia, barely out of adolescence; her older sister, Solomiya; and Yeva, who has dedicated her life to snail conservation. In the back, squeezed between refrigerators and lab equipment, are thirteen men in cheap tuxedos, Westerners who have come to Ukraine looking for an approximation of love. They don't know they have been kidnapped, just as the women don't know about the Russian tanks pouring across the border ahead. When the first missiles explode, the travellers wonder if they hear fireworks. Within a few days, one of their number will be dead, one will be grievously injured, and one will have been reborn as a national hero.

Anastasia and Solomiya are the daughters of Iolanta, a legendary feminist activist and the founder of Komod (a lightly fictionalized version of the women's rights organization FEMEN). When Iolanta suddenly cuts off all contact with them, they decide to earn a living by participating in "romance tours" for Western men interested in marrying Ukrainian women — precisely the kind of thing Iolanta has spent her life protesting. In a bid to lure their mother back into their lives, they decide to kidnap a group of bachelors. To do this, they enlist Yeva, who has done many tours herself to fund her mission of rescuing critically endangered species: "endlings" that are the last of their kind. The sisters need her trailer-lab to pull off the scheme. Yeva, whose life is going about as well as those of her dwindling population of gastropods, agrees.

The bachelors are mostly what you'd expect (bald, bloviating, business-minded) except for Pasha, a hopeless thirtysomething whose family left Ukraine for Canada in the '90s. Scrolling the Instagram accounts of relatives back in the old country, Pasha concludes that life would be easier in Europe. But after a few weeks in Kyiv, following a romance tour that has, despite his eligibility ("engineer, full head of hair"), ended in failure, he is invited by a fellow bachelor to join a secret, exclusive getaway hosted by some of the brides. Anastasia has cooked up this mysterious ruse to facilitate the kidnapping, and although Pasha is not initially chosen as one of the victims, his ability to understand Ukrainian and speak Russian will become essential to everyone involved.

This is the initial set-up of Maria Reva's *Endling*, but the novel takes a turn. We are

lifted out of the story and find ourselves in the author's parents' attic in British Columbia, listening to a metafictional phone conversation between her and her literary agent. They're discussing her manuscript when an email pops up with a picture of an apartment building blown apart by a Russian rocket. "Panic floods me: it's my aunt and uncle's building in Kyiv," she thinks, before looking more closely at the image. "No, the metal entrance doors are painted a different color from my aunt and uncle's. The tragedy passed on to another family."

The bridal industry caper fades into the background as Reva describes the phantasmagorical quality of living through war at a remove. There



A romp, an invasion, and then a turn.

are the usual things: the nagging pointlessness of going about life when her grandfather's city is being reduced to rubble, the constant sense of whiplash and dislocation, the fear, the relief, the guilt. But there is also the absurdity of writing under these conditions, perhaps best captured by an editor who expresses disappointment in an essay she submitted about how Ukrainians were using humour to survive the invasion. "We were hoping," he writes, "for your perspective as a Ukrainian expatriate watching the horror unfold from abroad (gentle emphasis on horror)." She also has complicated feelings about the sudden interest in her previous collection of stories, published in 2020 and initially overshadowed by the pandemic, which

is now "relevant." Reva explores these feelings through an interior dialogue with a collective of imaginary yurt makers (long story). "Who could've known that your best publicist would be Mr. Putin himself," they say, needling her about her insecurities. How Ukrainian is she, really? How much does she love her grandfather, who stubbornly refuses to leave Kherson? Is this all just content to her?

The postmodern confessional irruption is electrifying. This is what it's like: the loneliness, the guilt so large and complex it cannot be mapped in Euclidean space (you're lucky to not be there, you're ashamed to not be there, you wish it would stop so you could be happy again). Unfortunately, it is only a few dozen pages before we are back in the trailer with Anastasia, Solomiya, Yeva, and Pasha, the plot lurching into a series of mad stunts that read a bit like a P. G. Wodehouse take on Elem Klimov's film *Come and See*. Throughout the book, Reva turns to comedy and hysterical realism to drive home the fact that wars happen to ordinary people. Such an approach demands a lot of a writer's style, and hers too often falls short of the mark. Her overreliance on rhetorical questions, her fondness for redundancies, and her tendency to overexplain are a lethal drag on the narrative:

Yeva would steer a wayward child onto the right side of the law, change her life, possibly save it. Wasn't this what people did to feel good? Help other humans, a supposedly higher cause than helping nonhumans? Legacy, Yeva thought. Help a child find direction, become a mentor. Legacy — not in the field Yeva wanted, but who was she to choose?

Every character's internal monologue sounds like this, and these tics bedevil even the most climactic moments. When she gets out of her own way and simply tells the story, Reva lands some fantastic lines. But they end up feeling like scraps of melody lost in radio static.

Such shortcomings are forgotten in the scenes where the author is speaking directly to the reader. I can understand why a writer based in Canada might be chary of coming across as self-indulgent, penning a whole novel about her own experience when there's a war going on back home. But the missiles keep falling — on Ukraine, on Gaza, on Syria and Yemen and Sudan — and millions around the world now check their phones every morning with their hearts in their throats. The rage and powerlessness of the observer are among the defining experiences of the digital age, and they would, I think, be worthy of the full attention of a novelist as honest and inventive as Reva. ▲

In Touch

Bindu Suresh's shifting perspectives

Caroline Noël

The Road between Us

Bindu Suresh

Assembly Press

248 pages, softcover and ebook

WHILE PROMOTING HER DEBUT, *26 Knots*, the writer and pediatrician Bindu Suresh described a knot "as a complication in the thread of a character's life." Such imagery appears throughout the novel: its characters are tied inextricably to the choices they make, the people they love, and the sticky situations they create. Now, in *The Road between Us*, other entanglements abound. Spanning several decades, Suresh's disparate plot lines and shifting perspectives throw a group of interconnected people in and out of one another's orbits as they resist and capitulate to their impulses: romantic, self-destructive, and otherwise.

In the opening pages, Estela, a law clerk in Toronto, calls her former schoolmate Ash to ask a favour. Although inseparable as undergraduates at McGill, the two haven't spoken in fourteen years. As Estela remembers fragments of their early friendship, her thoughts turn to Roman, her thesis supervisor, with whom she had an affair. "They used his desk, cleared of graduate students' papers," Suresh writes. "Estela denied being in love with him, the one time Ash asked." Shame plagues her as she sifts through memories of the liaison that isolated her and left her pregnant at twenty. She blames herself for everything that happened—from the moment Roman first "placed his hand on her leg" to her abortion, from her leaving the academy to the wedge her relationship drove between her and Ash.

Short paragraphs that sparsely populate the pages carry us into Estela's mid-thirties. The non-linear vignettes reflect the novel's focus on regret and memory. Suresh's elliptical prose forces her reader, alongside her characters, to parse the past and to wonder, What if it had happened differently?

In tracing the emotional fallout from her time with Roman, Estela must confront painful truths about love and aging. Despite the lingering guilt from terminating her pregnancy (and from her younger brother's death), she considers trying for a child. She yearns for her "own, intact family, with a mom and a dad and one or two kids." But when her long-term partner, Allister, admits that he doesn't want any more children (his son, Oliver, died of osteosarcoma much earlier), Estela must choose between their life together and kids. "Regardless of what other consequences there might have been," she finds herself wishing "that she'd had that baby."



The disparate plot lines and interpretations converge on a single unpleasant truth.

Like Estela, who sees parenthood as "the only way" to stave off misery, many of Suresh's characters seek absolution or at least an escape from their suffering. Plagued with guilt following an accident at the hospital where she works, Ash's fiancée, Ophélie, ends their engagement, with "a single suitcase in tow." It is not until years later that she understands their breakup to be "the second-biggest mistake of her life." The few characters who accept their pain stand out. Allister knows that raising another child with Estela would redefine his identity as a father, which is inevitably linked to mourning. Unlike the way of surviving Oliver's death that his ex-wife, Sarah, has chosen—"to try to forget he'd even existed"—Allister's sorrow becomes the only living reminder of the person he was when his son was alive. "I can't again. I can't start over like that," he admits to Estela.

Roman's perspective offers surprisingly tender insight into a character who otherwise appears to be a stereotypical predator. Despite his penchant for younger women, Roman's insecurities render him rather helpless in their presence. We see him struggle with his own dishonesty; he regrets what he told his ex-wife Naomi, also a former student, about his reluctance to have a child with her. He wishes he'd said that it had "nothing to do with not being ready" and that the truth was he hadn't "loved any woman enough" since his split with another ex, Kate, who is the mother of his son. In the end, Suresh portrays Roman as something more than a morally bankrupt man masquerading as a caring husband, father, and professor.

Anguish, much more than bad intentions, leads him to hurt those closest to him.

Estela has phoned Ash after all these years to see if he'll testify in their university's hearing on Roman's misconduct (though, strangely, her background in law is rendered incidental at most). Naomi, who filed the complaint, has asked her "to go from rival to co-conspirator." Roman's inbox fills with reactions to the investigation. "I hope they strip you of your tenure the way you stripped those women who came to your office hours," one letter reads. "I had thought better of you," says another. In putting the proceedings at the centre of the novel, Suresh positions the reader—the only one privy to just how enmeshed these stories are—as a judge. Whether Ash files his witness statement or Roman is ultimately fired for his wrongdoings, however, is irrelevant. The consequences that matter here are inner, moral ones; all characters are implicated. Their shifting views show how seemingly fleeting decisions have far-reaching and often unknown outcomes. This exploration of cause and effect culminates with a revelation from Kate—"the worst secret of all"—that throws much of the previous plot into question.

The Road between Us considers an unpleasant truth: that one's supposedly complex impulses, needs, and ambitions can all be traced back to base desire. Only by untangling the many knots that make up our lives, Suresh suggests, can we reconcile the choices we make, the reasons we make them, and the people we become in their aftermath—for better or for worse. ▲

Border Crossings

Sulaiman Addonia and Madeleine Thien find refuge in storytelling

Kevin Jagernauth

The Seers

Sulaiman Addonia

Assembly Press

136 pages, softcover and ebook

The Book of Records

Madeleine Thien

Alfred A. Knopf Canada

368 pages, hardcover, ebook, and audiobook

IN BOTH POLICY DEBATES AND MEDIA coverage, refugees are often presented as a problem to be solved: an unknown mass traversing oceans and distant countries we've never set foot in and crossing invisible borders. The individual taking refuge is obscured by stereotypes and systems that promote cultural assimilation. When telling their stories, displaced people can only hope that listeners will try to understand the singularity of their experiences.

This idea drives Sulaiman Addonia's *The Seers*, which offers an erotic, defiantly uncompromising portrait of Hannah, a seventeen-year-old Eritrean refugee navigating life in Great Britain. "My mother gave birth to me in Keren, but I rebirthed myself in London that spring night as I topped Bina-Balozi on a bench in Fitzroy Square," she says in the novella's opening lines, establishing from the jump her unblinking frankness.

Hannah's sexual awakening is the theme that runs throughout her journey from Africa to Europe. Even amid the war that raged before she left, she and a family friend discovered that "the mutual pleasure when we inserted our fingers inside the other was like a current that streamed between us, as if reciprocity were our conductor." After arriving in England without a passport, having suffered emotional trauma from violent "things I can't stop thinking about," she takes up residence in Kilburn, at a foster home run by a woman named Diana. There Hannah must survive the racist barrage from the neighbour across the street and the fury of Diana's daughter. But these difficulties don't dampen her burgeoning wants.

"I remember I bought my strap-on the morning after I bumped into BB at a friend's house party," Hannah says, recalling the first time she met Bina-Balozi, a fellow immigrant. Even though he has a girlfriend on his arm, Hannah insatiably pursues him: "Everything about him called to be conquered, to be led, to be ravaged." They become lovers, but the intensity of their physical chemistry can't bridge their opposing views on remaining in a foreign country. "We spend a lifetime trying to conform to ideas handed down to us, I wanted to say



Putting the focus on those who are often obscured.

to him," Hannah thinks. "Let's instead build our own reality that reflects the ideas we birth in our imaginations—because imaginations are genderless wombs."

Her dedication to forging her way on her own terms is inspired, in part, by her late mother's diary, filled with its own carnal secrets and familial revelations. "My desires lie in what many consider horrific and disgusting," one passage reads. "My light comes from a dark place." Hannah's unbridled and aimless search to understand herself leaves her "oscillating between joy and sorrow while assuming multiple identities." When she prepares her asylum application, she is forced to confront how difficult it is to reflect who she is on paper. Her immigration lawyer omits important details about Hannah so that "it won't offend" and tries to explain to her that "every officer at the Home Office is looking for reasons to reject an application, so we just adjusted the story to give it a better chance of succeeding." Although she resents the "presentable version" of her past, she accepts its role in shaping her future.

The book consists of one distended paragraph, a restless trip through Hannah's precarious mindset. This formal experiment sometimes prevents emotional notes from landing. A sequence in which she goes to prison for physical assault, is promptly released, then proceeds to sexually assault a neighbour and lose her housing spans all of two pages. One wishes there were more time and detail afforded to moments like these, especially in such a slim volume. In

his acknowledgements, Addonia reveals that he crafted the first draft in three weeks on his iPhone, and that haste shows on occasion. Nonetheless, *The Seers* boldly resists catharsis and resolution, provoking readers to challenge their own notions about what it means to take refuge.

EXILE AND SEEKING ARE PURELY METAPHYSICAL concepts in *The Book of Records*. History and biography, memory and storytelling, and regret and hope intertwine in Madeleine Thien's dazzling fourth novel, which coils like a snake around the legs of past and future, beautifully articulating that finding home is rarely about securing a fixed address.

The story begins in the near future at the Sea, an ocean way station where refugees seek temporary shelter before catching the ship that will take them to their next destination. Seven-year-old Lina arrives with her father, Wui Shin, from Foshan, China, but when he falls severely ill, they must make a life for themselves in the transitional space until he is well enough to manage another long and uncertain voyage. Days turn to months, and months to years, but the densely built residential structures remain unknowable to them both. "Whole buildings now stood deserted, their roofs collapsed by storms. Some had a feeling of permanent night; some became lively neighbourhoods, brought momentarily to life by families who arrived and departed together," Lina says, evoking a set of blueprints that might have been designed by M.C. Escher. "We learned that the simplest way to navigate

the enclave was over the rooftops, which made a kind of patchwork road across the Sea."

When Wui Shin's sickness doesn't subside, he and Lina move into an apartment that connects them to three other residents: Bento, Blucher, and Jupiter. These neighbours recount the lives of "figures of fascination in the People's Republic of China": the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, the political theorist Hannah Arendt, and the poet Du Fu, respectively. The meta-narratives expand on Lina's three beloved volumes of *The Great Lives of Voyagers* — the only ones of the biographical series that her father had managed to grab as they fled. "The chapters kept you on the edge of your seat by describing narrow escapes, crushing heartaches, assassination attempts, and horrible betrayals," she says.

These treasured stories leap and expand off the page, coming to vivid life in their young reader's imagination. They occupy a significant portion of Lina's time and of the book itself. From them emerges a remarkable discourse about the manifold ways people can become refugees. Spinoza finds himself expelled from his religious community for heresy, leaving him — a son of Portuguese immigrants — a stranger in his own town of Amsterdam. We follow Arendt as the Nazi incursion sends her fleeing across Europe under an assumed name with forged paperwork. Du is thrown into limbo when he cannot find a way to turn his literary calling into a living, leading to a constant search for work. All are forced to assume identities or personalities and abandon the practices and arts they hold dear.

"A refugee must learn to be a master of disguises," an old woman tells Arendt's husband, Heinrich. "He who is being pursued must camouflage himself inside other people's worlds. But be warned. It takes only a moment to don a series of costumes but a lifetime to take them off." Thien's magical novel is itself a pleasurable hall of mirrors. As it unfolds, time refracts, and the Sea becomes a place of temporal terminus. Centuries and dynasties form and dissipate, and Lina's coming of age becomes part of an amorphous and haphazard history. The battles of these literary greats are hers, and hers is theirs, but to what end? "It's not that a listener forgets," her father says, "but that the one who survives to tell the story is always addressing a changed world."

◆

AN OLD ERITREAN PROVERB, REPEATED LIKE AN incantation throughout *The Seers*, declares, "Everything passes, love remains." In *The Book of Records*, Spinoza considers a question by his muse: "The quality of a given life depends on what a person chooses to love, isn't that so?" Both works seem to pose the same query: Is love the key that unlocks self-understanding?

To expect concision from a refugee narrator, particularly regarding where they're from and where they're going to, would be to want falsehood. Looking for clarity will lead only to the obfuscation of nuance. As both Addonia and Thien conclude, life is not linear, and we constantly seek belonging. It may be found in family, an ideal, a philosophy, or even the perfect phrase, but that continual yearning is an inextricable quality of being. We may not always be able to choose our paths or imagine those of our neighbours, they suggest, but love — in all its forms, ephemeral and intangible as it may be — is a generosity we can extend to those seeking solace from suffering. ▲

FICTION

The Believer

Amanda Leduc's zealous hero

Sara Krahn

Wild Life

Amanda Leduc

Random House Canada

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A NOVELIST WITH CEREBRAL PALSY, Amanda Leduc is preoccupied with how fabulist forms of storytelling can influence society's perception of disability. "As a disabled person in the world, I didn't feel like I could fit anywhere," she told the *Weird Era* podcast in April. "What I try to do in all of my work is gently interrogate structures of the stories that we tell." A plot-defying narrative that explores the boundaries between human and animal, her latest, *Wild Life*, asks, What does it mean to be whole?

The tale begins in early twentieth-century Scotland. Josiah, a neurotic, bespectacled young man who can communicate with animals, is forced to leave town with a Christian missionary expedition headed for Siberia. He's sent by his skeptical father, who blames him for his mother's death in a barn fire twenty years earlier. "May God show you beautiful things," Papa calls to his son as he departs. "May He make a work of your new life."

On the first day, Josiah meets Marcus, a mute. They become lovers, until a cataclysmic meteor strike kills everyone in the mission, save for Josiah, who is rescued by a creature "covered in orangey-brown fur with mottled dark spots." He immediately believes that God has presented himself in four-legged form and chosen him to be a prophet, even as the creature snaps, "I am not your Lord." The beast and its mate — named Barbara and Kendrith — are a pair of walking, talking hyenas, whom "the wind called" to bring Josiah back to Scotland. "Don't you hear it?" they ask. "The wind calls you home."

When Josiah returns, he finds the cultish Church of the Wild, whose mantra is "Whole bodies, whole selves." He gathers pilgrims known as the Ladder-Days and tells them he will "heal the world, soul by wandering soul." His grief over Marcus's passing, however, leads him astray. "He thinks he can ignore it and teach other people to ignore it too," Barbara says at one point. "He thinks that it makes him...an animal." In 1935, Josiah dies mysteriously, never having overcome his sorrow. (Unknown creatures allegedly tear him apart.)

The novel ends in British Columbia in 2041, about 130 years after Josiah establishes his church. The believer base steadily grows, and Barbara and Kendrith reappear during times of need. Each chapter offers a snapshot of various interactions with the hyenas and

the Ladder-Days, showing the ways humans experience disability, grief, and transformation.

Josiah's grandniece, Mhairi, teaches the hyenas how to bake shortbread and then abandons her family to become a chef in France. Decades later, her grandson, Theo, works on a train that "glides over the Atlantic on tracks anchored to the ocean floor," from Lisbon to Boston. He meets Barbara and Kendrith on board before the *Nautilus Express* sinks, reportedly assailed by a giant squid. At another point, a man moves into a triplex in Vancouver and rents out a floor to the hyenas after he loses his wife to breast cancer (she may actually have disappeared with the Ladder-Days). And a renowned cellist from Toronto loses three fingers in a car accident and discovers his instrument can play itself. One episode follows another, and the effect proves dizzying, with new settings, individuals, and narrative threads jostling for space on the page and in the reader's mind.

But the effect also proves delightful. Leduc's prose shimmers with enchanting details, such as the rare blue tarantula that Theo discovers, "tucked into the angle between the bed's alcove wall and the ceiling," or the dove, who goes by Aviva, that emerges from where a character's "left breast used to be." There's also Lizzie, a partially deaf woman who, in a violent but liberating act of self-defence, gnaws off her abusive ex-boyfriend's cheek. Back home, safe with the hyenas, her face grows "narrow, blunt — part dog, part cat, part neither."

The reader's connection to these characters is meant to be less emotional, more intellectual. A chapter that takes the form of a heavy-handed research paper for a dissertation on the Ladder-Days, complete with footnotes and supervisor comments, underscores the novel's central idea: "What does it mean to deny infirmity, to deny and bury grief? Does that denial create an alternative reality — in the most literal sense — in which one then lives? And how does the nature of that new reality — religion as social epidemic, as personal magic spell that casts its net over so many — in turn reflect the world around us?"

Wild Life is critical of religious zealotry and its handling of disability. The church may seek to fulfill the "wildest hope" of its congregants: that they might transcend whatever afflicts them, be it psychological trauma or a physical ailment, and evolve into a "higher state of consciousness," shedding "the animal parts of ourselves." But Leduc challenges such doctrine with characters whose rugged nature becomes essential to their arcs, and by the end, a kind of pantheism emerges. Indeed, how belief alters our views on disability is the oil burning beneath each fabulous, flickering storyline. ▲

Gripped

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, WHILE browsing the shelves in Pages, one of my favourite used-book shops in Calgary, I found a copy of Anakana Schofield's *Martin John*. I'd been hunting for it for months, ever since I first read about it in *The Worst Truth*, John Metcalf's castigating essay on Canadian fiction. In that slim volume, Metcalf commended the Giller-nominated title while savaging several other books I'd enjoyed. If Schofield's second novel could earn the literary critic's rare approval — he acquired the book for his imprint at Biblioasis — there had to be something to it. "Game on, Metcalf," I thought.

But the 2015 publication sat untouched on my crowded bookshelf for over two years. Like many bibliophiles, I compulsively bring home more than I can possibly read, even when every available surface is stacked with uncracked spines. Sometimes I purge the clutter, hauling heavy bags to Little Free Libraries, but the piles inevitably regrow. I can't help myself.

Recently, while I was sorting my unwieldy collection to find something to read, *Martin John* caught my eye. What first drew me in was the way the Irish Canadian writer uses language to mirror her characters' inner worlds — especially that of her protagonist, an eccentric Irish man struggling to make his way in London. Martin John's thoughts are scattered and chaotic, reflected in the text's short, punchy sentences and frenetic, shifting focus. Section and page breaks fragment the narrative. Many paragraphs are one sentence long; numerous pages are made up almost entirely of white space. The reader rapidly moves through the story in a way that imitates the clamour of Martin John's mind. And much of the language is cryptic. One whole page reads: "The Boss likes Martin John. He likes him for one reason. Martin John is reliable. He is never late and rarely off sick. Martin John knows this. His onion is on the pan."

The threads of this unconventional text are woven together into a dark fabric. Martin John is a pervert who gets his thrills by exposing himself to women and rubbing up against strangers on the Tube. Although people report him to transit security and the police, he repeatedly escapes the authorities — or they let him go with a warning — and goes on to reoffend.

Schofield frames her character's transgressive urges as uncontrollable: "He has made mistakes. All his life he has made mistakes. He continues to make mistakes. By Christ if he could only stop with the mistakes." He tries to restrain himself by working hard and punishing himself, which includes holding in his urine until he is in pain. Despite his strict regimens, his impulses remain. They lurk beneath the surface, ready to surge when life's pressures mount. "Whenever things sour down on the job," Martin John goes to Euston Station, where "opportunities prevail. Legs, flesh, feet and trains."

Our susceptibility to strong yearnings is part of the human condition. "The will," the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote, "is devoid of knowledge, and is only a blind, irresistible urge." Reason and self-discipline may temper these forces, but irrational cravings will persist. While Martin John's behaviour certainly deserves our disgust, he is also somewhat pitiful, because he didn't choose his sordid desires. Again, from Schopenhauer: "You can do what you will, but in any given moment of your life you can *will* only one definite thing and absolutely nothing other than that one thing."

Ultimately, to curb his perversions, Martin John submits to a crude form of self-denial invented by his mother: "Mam tied his two wrists to the arms of the Chair. He didn't struggle, just sat there limp, slouched like he'd been stuffed."

Schofield's innovative use of language transforms disturbing scenes into compelling, funny, and humanizing moments. Martin John is a pervert, yes, but he's no monster. He's unwell, needing treatment and support that the community around him can't or won't provide. "It was a time when people didn't ask as many questions. That was the time it was," the ever elusive narrator says. The society that Martin John belongs to doesn't know what to do with people like him.

Morally ambiguous protagonists are unnerving. By framing Martin John as both criminal and vulnerable, Schofield grapples with blurred ethical responsibilities and the limits of free will, forcing her reader to ask, What if we, too, were subject to such overpowering compulsions?

I'm very glad this bold, gripping, and challenging novel landed on my bookshelf — and made it into my hands — whether it was my free will or "the will" that put it there. ▲

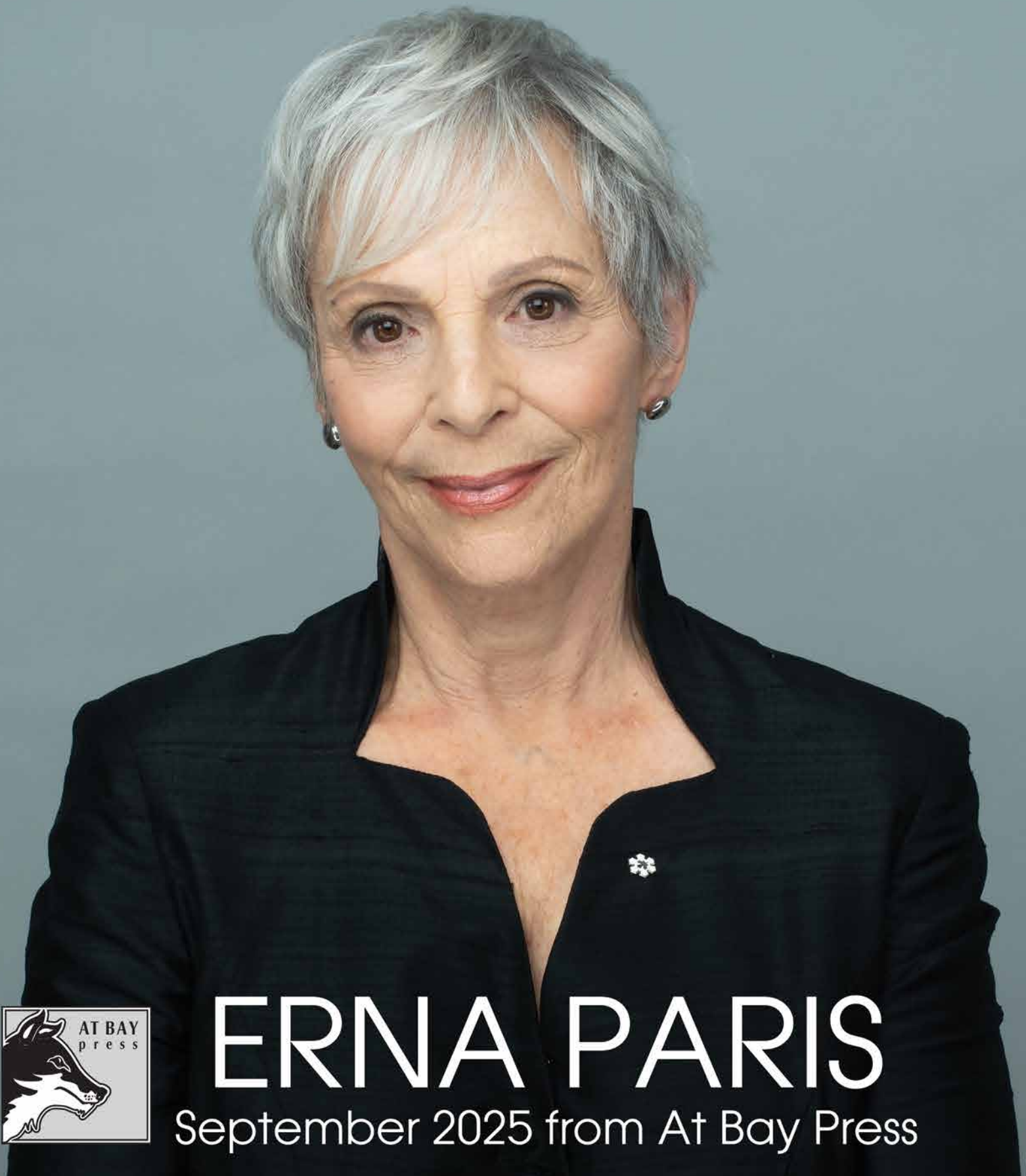
Andrew Torrey is a writer and curriculum designer in Calgary.

"Erna Paris shone her flashlight into many dark corners of human history during her life. In this, her last book, she gives us insights and warnings that couldn't be more timely."

- **Margaret Atwood**

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