

OCTOBER 2025

DAN FALK In a Hot, Dense State **CHRIS JONES** How Lorne and Graydon Took On New York
SUZANNE STEWART After Fiona Stormed Through **JAMES CHATTO** On the Menu, Literally

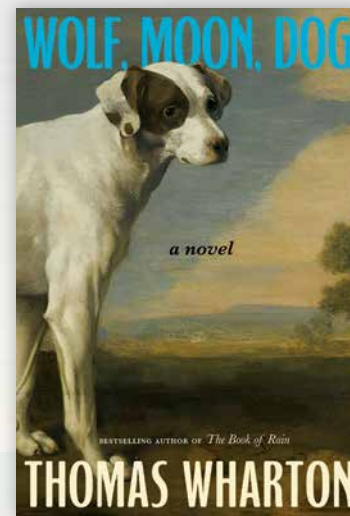
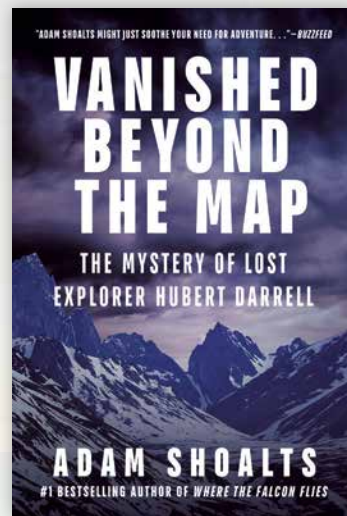
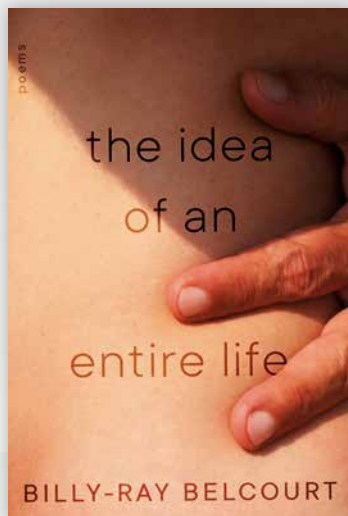
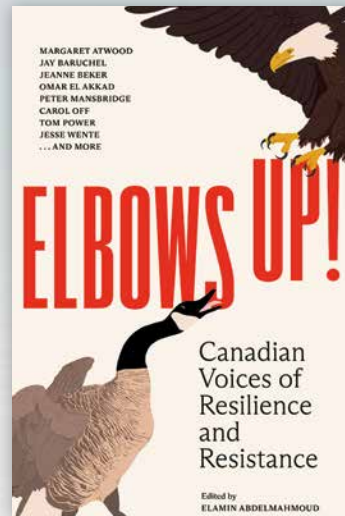
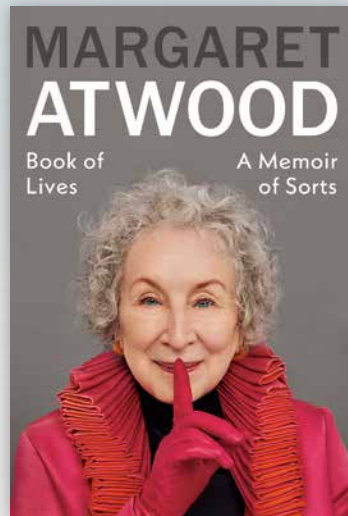
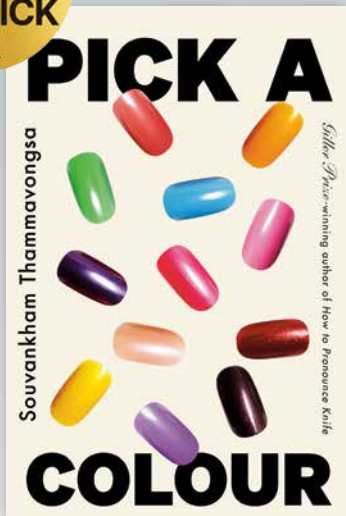
Literary Review of Canada

A JOURNAL OF IDEAS



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OUR CONTRIBUTORS

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Steve Driscoll, Relishing the warm summer air, 2025, oil pigments and urethane on composite panel, 60 x 67 in.

STEVE DRISCOLL

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Little Woman

NOT FAR FROM THE SEAT OF PRESIDENTIAL power in Buenos Aires sits an incredulous six-year-old girl who questions everything. “What democratic sector do cats fall into?” she asks her mother. “Papa, what does ‘Fortune favors the brave’ mean??” she wants to know. “Can you explain why humanity is a disaster?”

Skeptical, inquisitive, and inherently decent, young Mafalda is a tourist magnet, posing on her shaded bench with visitors from around the world who pour into her neighbourhood of San Telmo, many of them from the cruise ships that dock nearby. With her dark hair and trademark bow, she is an opinionated beacon, a mouthpiece for difficult but necessary questions: “Who got us into this mess, huh? If I get my hands on him I’ll give him what for!!” As Umberto Eco once put it, she is “a hero of our time.”

Mafalda, of course, is a comic-strip character, a Latin American answer to Charlie Brown or Blondie. Originally conceived as part of a home-appliances advertising campaign that never ran, she made her editorial debut in *Primera plana* magazine in September 1964. The following year she moved to *El Mundo*, and when that daily newspaper shut down, she began appearing in the weekly *Siete días ilustrados*. Her creator, popularly known as Quino, ended the strip in June 1973, on the eve of the Dirty War. “If I had continued drawing her, they would have shot me,” he later said of the military junta.

Long after her nine-year run, the perceptive girl who hates fascism, imperialism, and any kind of soup has continued entertaining readers in Argentina and beyond. Collected volumes of Mafalda’s adventures with her friends Felipe, Manolito, and Susanita have been translated into more than a dozen languages, from Armenian and Chinese to Hebrew and Romanian. She is featured in countless art installations, both sanctioned and guerrilla. Her face adorns mugs, key chains, water bottles, backpacks, and T-shirts.

Yet, until recently, Mafalda’s astute interrogations of a grown-up world headed in the wrong direction have been largely unavailable to English audiences. Thankfully, that changed this summer with a new book — the first of five — translated by Frank Wynne. “I think maybe I’m starting to understand why humanity has such a hard time moving forward!” she declares in a republished frame. I can only imagine what she would make of 2025.

How do you explain — to someone who is six or sixty — what’s happening in the United States? The president has sacked the head of the Bureau of Labor Statistics and has undermined the independence of the Federal Reserve. He has deployed armed National Guard troops to the streets of Washington, with Chicago and San Francisco possibly next. He has fired the Librarian of Congress and literally rewritten history at the Smithsonian. He has attacked the “stupidity” of renewable energy. He has glad-handed with an accused war criminal on American soil, has held university research dollars hostage, has detained and deported citizens, has given the green light for logging and mining in millions of hectares of national forest, has threatened water quality safeguards for the Great Lakes, and has gutted AIDS prevention efforts in defiance of Congress. Then there are those mercurial tariffs he’s imposed on the rest of us.

“I don’t have to do what anyone says, Mama!” Mafalda declares at one point, imagining what it’s like to be accountable to no one. “I’m the president!” Later, she openly characterizes Congress as “a really hilarious farce” and throws a tantrum when she’s backed into a corner while playing chess with Felipe. It’s the same attitude that’s now projected from the Oval Office: infantile, imperious, reckless.

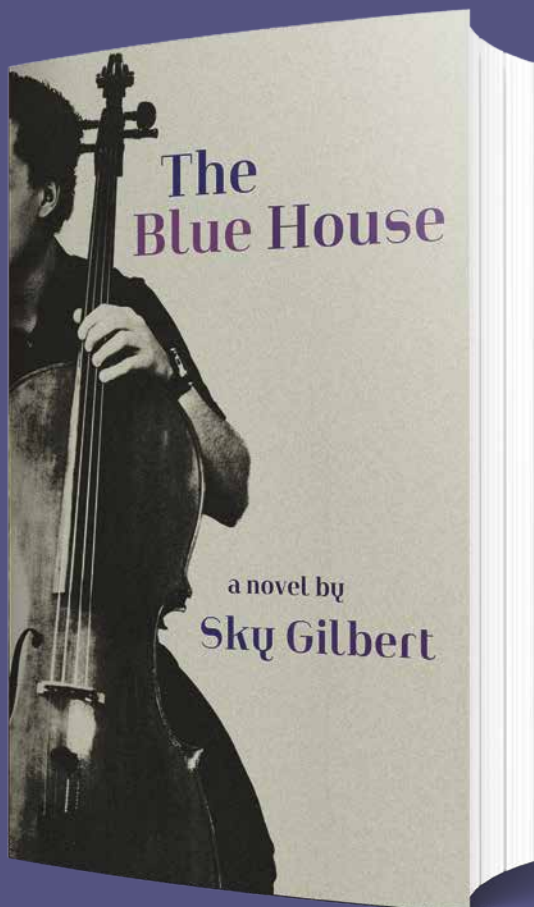
Written in Spanish, Quino’s Mafalda was censored in dictatorial Bolivia and Chile as well as in Francisco Franco’s Spain (the comic was published there with a banner that indicated “for adults only”). Her critiques of doctrinaire decrees and authoritarian tendencies transcend geopolitical boundaries; they hit home even as the particular circumstances change. They are as perceptive and poignant now as they were generations ago. They clarify, as much as any cable-news panel or think piece I’ve seen, what we’re all watching unfold, seemingly at the mercy of a fitful egotist.

Mafalda may now be widely available in English, but I’m sure it’s only a matter of time before we learn of local officials and paranoid parents calling for her to be banned from school libraries. “Unstable...,” the precocious hero hears on the radio. “Rapidly becoming turbulent...” Mafalda is listening to the weather forecast, but she knows such descriptions are equally applicable to strongmen and their legions.

From her bench in San Telmo, Mafalda has watched governments come and go. Her staying power, despite the odds, is a thing of hope. ▲

Kyle Wyatt, Editor

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A PERSON DECIDES TO LIVE ONLY IN THEIR IMAGINATION?



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— Matt Usher, *Compulsive Reader*

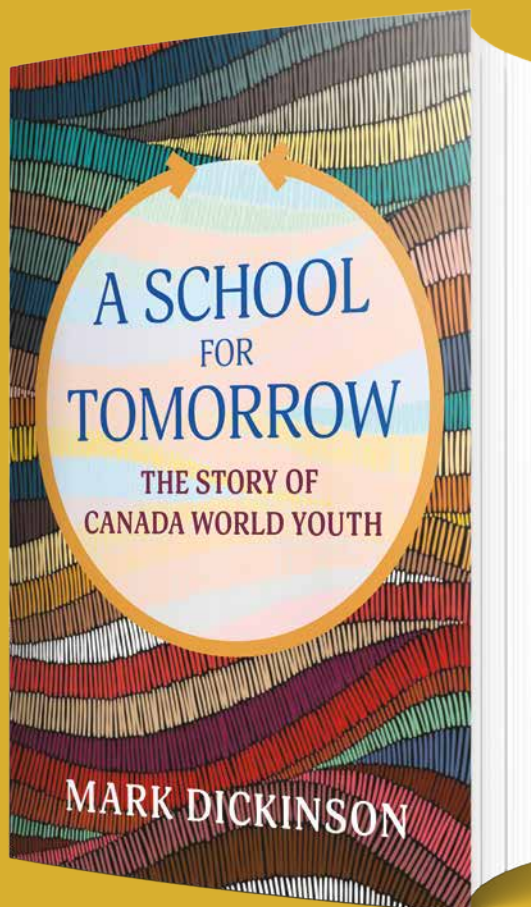


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— Jacques Hébert, Founder,
Canada World Youth /
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he splits his time between commercial
work, personal projects, and teaching.

Furthermore

RE: *Details*
by Daniel Woolf (September)

I VERY MUCH ENJOYED DANIEL WOOLF'S THOUGHTFUL essay on the fraught topic of place names and commemoration. But I would like to address a comment he makes about *When Heroes Become Villains*, which deals with three historical figures in British Columbia: Joseph William Trutch, William Bowser, and John Sebastian Helmcken.

I do not doubt that the portrayal of Helmcken in Jon Bartlett and Brian Robertson's book may support Woolf's rather surprising conclusion that the doctor and politician "scores highest on the villainy scale, having, in the authors' view, responsibility for a smallpox epidemic that ravaged Indigenous communities."

But Helmcken was not responsible for the 1862 epidemic — how could one man be? — and such an accusation contradicts the historical record. For example, in his *Reminiscences*, written in 1892 but not published until 1975, Helmcken makes a point of disagreeing with those who said that smallpox vaccinations made no difference. The Songhees, he states, "kept comparatively free from the disease and many of them...had been successfully vaccinated by me — arm to arm."

But don't take his word for it. On April 26, 1862, the *Colonist* newspaper reported that Helmcken had "vaccinated over 500 natives since the disease first made its appearance here" about five weeks earlier. That does not sound like a refusal to address the epidemic.

Although I think Woolf regards the authors of *When Heroes Become Villains* as prone to hyperbole, he graciously remarks that he appreciates being "enlightened" by their book. Insofar as Helmcken is concerned, that is the wrong word. Everyone's record is mixed, but in my view it strains belief to lump Helmcken in with the likes of Trutch and Bowser.

Hamar Foster
Victoria

RE: *Current Affairs*
by Sheldon Goldfarb (September)

SHELDON GOLDFARB'S REVIEW OF EVE LAZARUS'S *Beneath Dark Waters: The Legacy of the Empress of Ireland Shipwreck* was a fascinating one, and I have something to add, taken from the diary of my great-uncle, a housemaster at the Charterhouse School, in Godalming, England, concerning my great-grandmother, who had been visiting my grandparents in Victoria.

"The year 1914 is fixed in the memory of all people alive in that year," my great-uncle wrote. "For me it was more than the year of the

outbreak of war. For in May of that year Mother was due to return to England after her last round-the-world journey. And then, tragically, the problem (mother's return and with whom she was going to live having long since separated from her husband) was solved in a way that none of us (her children) had anticipated. For the Empress of Ireland was rammed in the fog in the St. Lawrence River, and went down in a few minutes. But we never had any news at all of Mother except a suggestion that her cabin was amidships — in the part of the ship that bore the full blow of the collier that hit the Empress of Ireland, so that it was quite probable that she met her death at once, and in her sleep, instead of by drowning. But the thought was not much comfort to us."

James P. Carley
Toronto

RE: *Reader's Digest*
by James Brooke-Smith (September)

THE "ENNOBLING EFFECTS OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE" are worth emphasizing in an age when, and in an academy where, writing is reduced to "text." Rory Stewart, in the BBC Radio series *The Long History of...*, talks about a similar thing when he refers to wonderment. As described in his six episodes on ignorance, creativity begins with a lack of knowledge, a much under-appreciated condition. An aesthetic experience comes from the same place.

Andrew M. Stewart
Toronto

RE: *Air Mail*
by David Marks Shribman (September)

I READ DAVID MARKS SHRIBMAN'S REVIEW OF Andrew Forbes's *Field Work* midway through watching the Little League World Series. Happening at the same time was the Trump-Putin gabfest in Alaska and the subsequent meeting of the Coalition of the Willing.

Shribman extracted this quote from the Forbes book: "It seems to me that truth is less important than maintaining a clear hierarchy of governance alongside jurisdictional transparency." Reading that, it occurred to me that perhaps the Russia-Ukraine war ought to be settled on a baseball diamond. However, there would be one caveat: no member of the Trump administration should umpire the game. That's more of a Canadian thing.

Bill Engleson
Denman Island, British Columbia

RE: *Regimental Thinking*
by J.L. Granatstein (June)

I WAS PLEASED TO SEE YOUR JUNE 2025 ISSUE include favourable mention of *Calgary's Infantry Regiment: A Pictorial History of the Calgary Highlanders*. As the primary author of that book, I was especially gratified that it came to the attention of J.L. Granatstein, whose historical works I greatly enjoy and respect.

That said, I feel compelled to correct some impressions left by his review, which may obscure what the book's pages offer.

While the subtitle may suggest otherwise, *Calgary's Infantry Regiment* is not merely a photo book. It includes over 100,000 words of meticulously researched text, drawing on numerous previously untapped primary sources from regimental archives. Volunteers and I aimed to provide the first ever comprehensive history of the 103rd Calgary Rifles and to contextualize the evolution of the Calgary Highlanders within the broader framework of Canada's reserve army. Granatstein erroneously suggests we focused on "every royal visit...and training exercise." In fact, such events are mentioned selectively to illustrate broader trends in regimental and reserve force culture. This made space for other, weightier topics, like the development of a deployment ethos that contributed to the unit's extraordinary wartime performance in Afghanistan.

In the same review, Granatstein praises Patrick H. Brennan's *Onward: The King's Own Calgary Regiment in Peace and War, 1910-1960*. That book, however, omits key aspects that ours highlights — including the critical role the militia's officers and non-commissioned officers played in leading Canadian Expeditionary Force battalions during the First World War and the contributions of the home-front components in both world wars. By contrast, *Onward's* coverage of the ten-year history of the 103rd is limited to a single sentence.

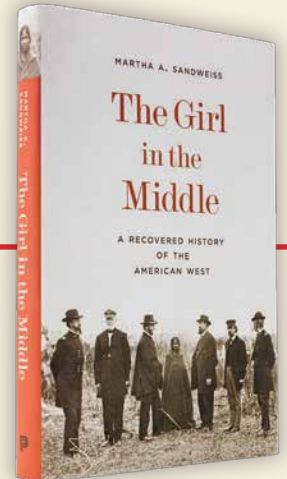
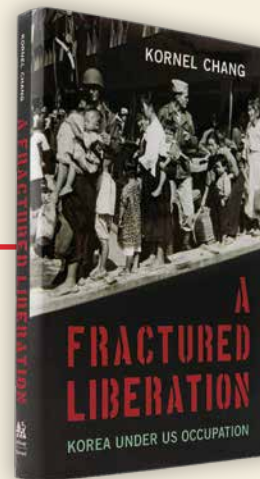
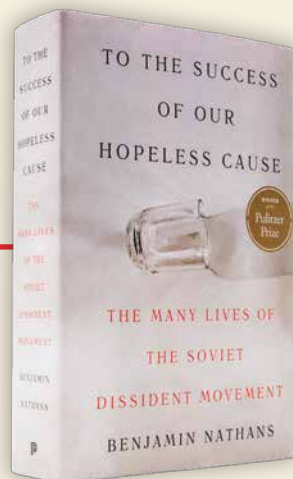
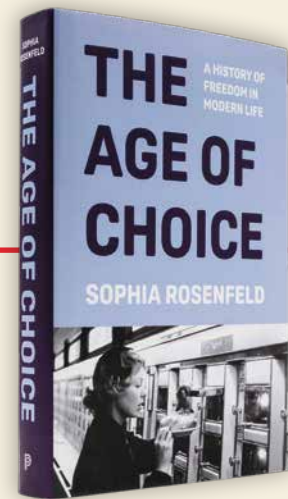
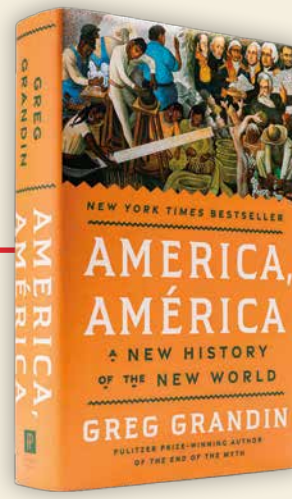
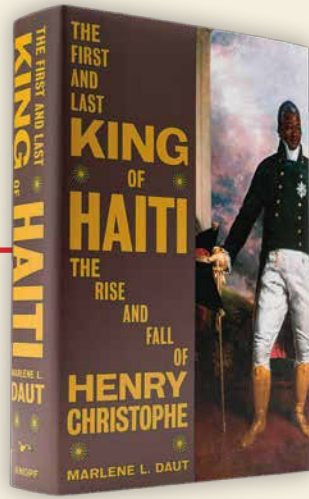
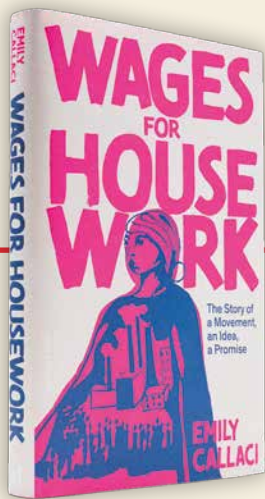
I welcome Granatstein's recognition of the Calgary Highlanders as a "fine regiment," and I appreciate the "lavish" descriptor applied to our book. But I would urge readers — and reviewers — not to mistake visual presentation for lack of scholarly rigour. *Calgary's Infantry Regiment* breaks new ground, and I believe it contributes meaningfully to our understanding of Canada's military history.

Michael A. Dorosh
Calgary

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In the Beginning

Do we really understand the big bang?

Dan Falk

Battle of the Big Bang: The New Tales of Our Cosmic Origins

Niayesh Afshordi and Phil Halper

University of Chicago Press

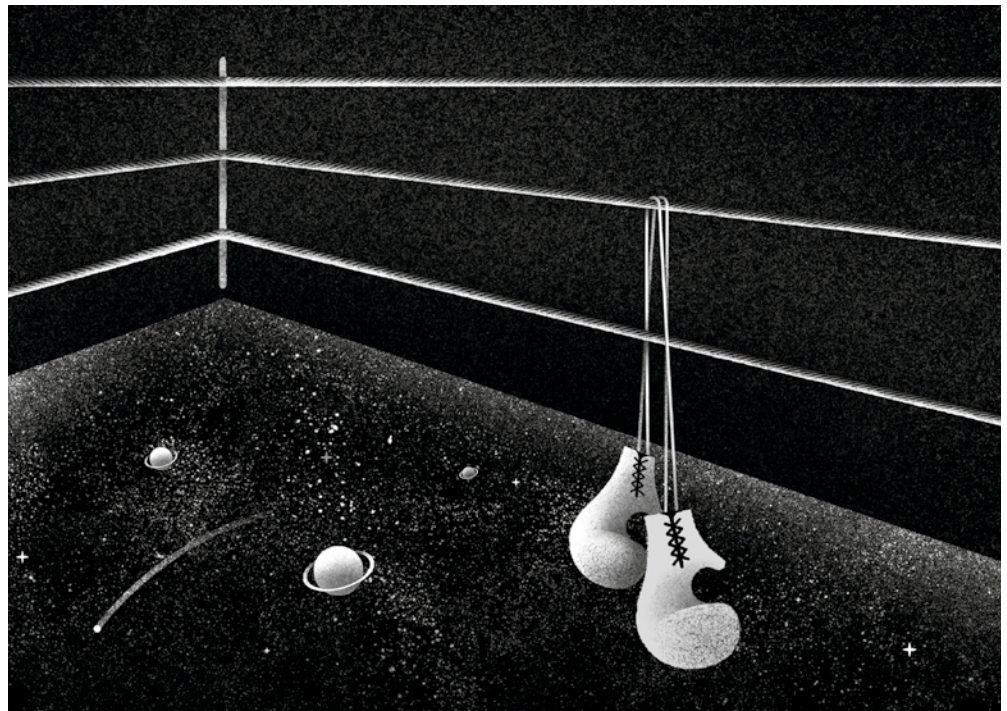
416 pages, hardcover and ebook

FANS OF THE BIG BANG THEORY WILL know that “our whole universe was in a hot, dense state”—which is indeed how scientists often describe the earliest moments of the cosmos. The devil, though, is in the details. We’re pretty confident in the big bang model of cosmology (now slightly harder to google, thanks to the TV show), which says that the universe came into existence a bit less than 14 billion years ago and has been expanding and cooling ever since. But what was it, exactly, that banged? Was it a single bang? Could there have been multiple bangs leading to multiple universes? What, if anything, came before?

This is where Niayesh Afshordi and Phil Halper pick up the story in *Battle of the Big Bang*. Afshordi is an astrophysicist at the University of Waterloo and an associate faculty member at the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics, and Halper is a science popularizer and YouTuber. They make a good pair: Afshordi handles the overall narration while drawing on the many interviews that Halper has conducted with experts over the last fifteen years or so.

Our understanding of the big bang dates back to the early twentieth century, when Albert Einstein developed his theory of gravity, known as general relativity. Soon after coming up with his equations, he tried applying them to the universe as a whole and found, surprisingly, that they didn’t seem to allow for a static universe; instead, they appeared to require the universe to be either expanding or contracting. At first, Einstein balked. Like most scientists, he believed in an unchanging, static universe. At around the same time, however, astronomers were learning how to measure the distances to far-off galaxies. They soon discovered not only that those galaxies are moving away from our own Milky Way but that the more distant the galaxy, the faster it’s receding. (This does not mean we’re in a special place: observers in any other galaxy would find the same effect.) The universe is expanding, just as Einstein’s equations suggested.

The implications are profound. Wind back the clock, and the universe gets smaller. If you go back far enough, it must have been incredibly tiny. Eventually the notion of a cosmic explosion took root, though the term “big bang” was coined only in 1949 when the astronomer Fred Hoyle used it on a BBC Radio program. (Here



Debates surrounding the origins of our universe have become more heated.

Afshordi and Halper add a tidbit that I wasn’t aware of. While we’re often told that Hoyle meant the term to be disparaging, the historian Helge Kragh has suggested that he was merely trying to explain the various proposals for the universe’s origins in layman’s terms.)

The most compelling piece of evidence for the big bang was found—by accident—when radio astronomers detected a faint all-sky glow in the mid-1960s. The universe is awash in this microwave radiation, which we now call the cosmic microwave background, or CMB. (Although the discovery of the CMB is usually credited to the American astronomers Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson, the authors point out that this microwave glow was, in fact, noticed by a Canadian astronomer, Andrew McKellar, some twenty-five years earlier. McKellar had been studying the chemistry of interstellar space and did not realize the significance of the all-sky microwave radiation. Nonetheless, Afshordi and Halper describe him as “the first person in history to see the afterglow of the Big Bang.”)

But puzzles remained. One problem was that the CMB is very “smooth”: that is, there’s only the tiniest difference between its most and least intense regions. If the universe were small, that wouldn’t be so surprising: its various regions could have interacted with one another, smoothing everything out. But the universe is big—and it’s been around for only 14 billion years. There just hasn’t been enough time for this smoothing out to happen, across such large distances.

In the early 1980s, cosmologists put forward a possible solution: a modified version of the big bang picture called inflation. According to inflation, the universe went through a period of incredibly rapid expansion during its first split second of existence. This moment of exponential growth helps to explain why the universe is so large and yet so smooth. But inflation, depending on which version you support, delivers more than this insight: some physicists have argued that if it could happen once, why not a million times, or an infinite number of times? Inflation thus paved the way for the “eternally inflating multiverse,” one of several scenarios that physicists have been pondering in which our universe is just one of many.

The evidence for inflation is circumstantial: it’s consistent with what we see, but some other theory might be equally compatible. What would it take to prove that the universe’s hypothesized growth spurt actually happened? In 2014, astronomers using the BICEP telescope thought they had done it. (The acronym stands for Background Imaging of Cosmic Extragalactic Polarization, and yes, astronomers are *really* into acronyms.) Their experiment, located at the South Pole, was one of many designed to map the CMB in fine detail; the idea was to look for barely discernible patterns in the radiation called B-modes. These subtle patterns were said to be evidence of ripples in space-time known as gravitational waves—or, more precisely, the imprint that those waves left on the CMB at the very beginning of the universe. It was not to

be, however. Subsequent observations showed that the signal that BICEP measured was largely the result of dust in our own Milky Way and not a signature of early universe physics. (Had the astronomers really snagged those B-modes, arguably clinching the case for inflation, it would have been a Nobel-worthy discovery; indeed, Brian Keating, who conceived the experiment, titled his 2018 book *Losing the Nobel Prize*.)

In the years that followed, the debates surrounding inflation only became more heated. In 2017, Anna Ijjas, Paul J. Steinhardt, and Avi Loeb argued in *Scientific American* that inflation, by predicting a possibly infinite array of universes, ends up saying nothing about the one we actually live in. (Steinhardt is an especially interesting case; an early proponent of inflation, he later turned against it because of this lack of explanatory power.) Inflation's defenders were incensed by the critique and quickly penned a reply, recruiting such luminaries as Stephen Hawking and the Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg to sign their rebuttal.

Here the authors' status as insiders pays off: they've spoken with all the key players on both sides of the inflation kerfuffle and do an admirable job of illustrating how it unfolded. Loeb, for example, "compared inflationary cosmologists to religious zealots who 'feel offended if someone doubts their idea.'" (Just a few years later, he argued that the object known as 'Oumuamua, which passed through our solar system in 2017, was likely an alien spacecraft, and he railed against those who doubted *him*.)

Tension between inflation's backers and detractors, Afshordi and Halper note, remains high. When Halper invited several of the key

players to a debate, Ijjas and Steinhardt both refused. Steinhardt claimed that "the idea had done too much damage to the credibility of science and was too trivial to be worth discussing." For his part, Afshordi says he believes "that most cosmologists side with inflation, but many are uneasy with its accompanying multiverse."

♦

INFLATION IS NOT THE ONLY GAME IN TOWN, AND several competing cosmological models — all of them variations on the standard big bang view — battle it out in this book's meaty chapters. A variety of "cyclic" models have been put forward, for instance. They suggest that what we interpret as the big bang was merely a transition from an earlier universe — an earlier phase of the multiverse, one might say — to the present one. In other words, the big bang is very much *not* the beginning of time. Neil Turok, who served as the director of the Perimeter Institute from 2008 to 2019, is among those who have defended such models; so too has the mathematical physicist Roger Penrose, who was awarded a Nobel Prize in 2020 for his early work on black holes. (For an idea of what it's like to *be* Roger Penrose, check out Patchen Barss's excellent biography, *The Impossible Man*.)

Readers will also learn about the "holographic principle," a mind-bending idea in which a volume of space can be described as though all the information about the space were encoded on its surface (sneakily reducing the description from three dimensions down to two). While it may seem to a layperson that this move was conjured out of thin air, the authors show how it ties into earlier research on black holes by Hawking and his collaborator Jacob Bekenstein, who found that the entropy of a black hole is related to the surface area of its event horizon. (If you've never heard of entropy or event horizons before, this book is likely not for you.) Pie in the sky as it may sound, Afshordi notes that the holographic principle continues to inform his own efforts to make sense of the origin of the universe.

If you think the holographic principle is mind-blowing, try this out: space and time may not be fundamental; rather, they may have emerged from some more primitive entity, however many milliseconds after the initial big bang (and probably much more quickly). A key idea here is that quantum entanglement — the weird connection that can exist between certain particles regardless of how far apart they are — is linked to the structure of space-time itself. Roughly put, if two particles are quantum mechanically entangled, the result is mathematically equivalent to what you'd have if the two particles were connected by a wormhole, a hypothesized tunnel through space-time.

The book also notes more down-to-earth episodes, like the peculiar case of the English theoretical physicist Paul Frampton. In spite of making important contributions to high-energy particle physics, he was not on the ball enough to discern that the Brazilian bikini model with whom he exchanged emails in the early 2010s was (surprise!) not a Brazilian model at all. "She" tricked him into taking a bag from Belgium to Argentina; it was full of cocaine, and he ended up serving nearly five years in a South American prison. As smart as these folks are, they are also all too human.

A welcome element in this volume is the lack of idolization. While many physicists

continue to speak of the late Richard Feynman in almost hagiographic terms, Afshordi and Halper acknowledge his moral shortcomings. They note that his FBI file revealed abuse allegations by his ex-wife, and they point to "the naked misogyny evident in his public writings." (The authors don't mention it, but apparently, as a young professor at Caltech, Feynman would pretend to be an undergraduate while hitting on young women.)

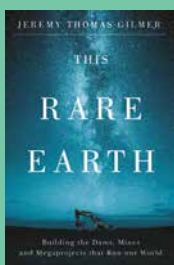
Battle of the Big Bang takes a somewhat surprising turn in the penultimate chapter, as Afshordi and Halper ponder the relationship, such as it is, between science and religion. Born and raised in Iran, Afshordi has a keen sense of how religious enthusiasm can narrow a society's horizons — and he makes it clear that what he values about science is that it plays by (or *should* play by) a different set of rules. At the end of the day, observation and experiment ought to be the final arbiters when choosing among competing theories. As for actually mixing science and religion (or turning science *into* a religion), the authors take a hard pass. Even when a scientific idea does seem to align with a particular religious view, one should exercise caution. Consider the case of the early twentieth-century Belgian physicist Georges Lemaître, who was also a Catholic priest. Lemaître was a proponent of what he called the "primeval atom" model of the early universe, which had much in common with the big bang model that would be developed soon afterwards. Lemaître recognized that this view of the universe's creation carried echoes of Genesis, but he also understood that there was little to be gained by pushing the comparison too far (and he got mad when Pope Pius XII did just that).

♦

AS WE WAIT FOR DEFINITIVE OBSERVATIONAL evidence (and it may be a prolonged wait), perhaps we can allow the beauty and elegance of our theories to guide us toward truth. Or can we? Physicists often speak of beauty and elegance, but what they have in mind may be mostly in the eye of the beholder. As Afshordi puts it, "My theorist friends point me to the amazing mathematical successes of their frameworks: canceling anomalies, dualities, or exact solutions of complex systems of equations. These frameworks offer so much to revel in, yet when I close my eyes, I see the wondrous St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, or the breathtaking Shah Mosque in Isfahan, constructed to draw awe and inspire the faithful. But then, is the grandeur of one's cathedral a measure of the truth in one's theory?" (For more on the dangers of being guided by the supposed mathematical beauty of physicists' theories, see Sabine Hossenfelder's provocative *Lost in Math: How Beauty Leads Physics Astray*, from 2018.)

The origin of the universe is a problem but hardly our only one. The authors readily admit that climate change is more pressing. Yet who hasn't wondered where humankind came from, where life came from, and, ultimately, where the whole shebang of stars and planets and galaxies came from? We may be far from truly understanding the universe's earliest moments; even so, Afshordi and Halper relish what we have found so far and encourage the reader to delight in it also: "We have come a long way, and we should take a moment to pause and marvel at the grandeur of our playground, where hard science meets human imagination." ▲

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The Explorer's Gene: Why We Seek Big Challenges, New Flavors, and the Blank Spots on the Map

Alex Hutchinson

Mariner Books

304 pages, hardcover, ebook, and audiobook

ALEX HUTCHINSON HAD A PROBLEM. An enviable problem, it would seem, given that just a few years earlier his *Endure: Mind, Body, and the Curiously Elastic Limits of Human Performance*, with a foreword by Malcolm Gladwell, had found its way onto the bestseller lists and “positioned me perfectly to brand myself as ‘the science of endurance guy’ and milk that role for the rest of my working life.”

Can you hear dissatisfaction in those words? Hutchinson’s confident, lucid reporting on the latest developments in studies of physical achievement and human performance had long commanded admiration from inquisitive sports scientists, fitness obsessives, and business gurus looking for a competitive edge. Fellow journalists like Gladwell, compelled to explain the complexities of cutting-edge research in everyday language, could barely contain their envy at Hutchinson’s range of skills. Not only had he earned a PhD in condensed matter physics from Cambridge’s renowned Cavendish Laboratory and secured a post-doc with the National Security Agency, but he had an easy way with words and ideas after a stint at the Columbia Journalism School and several years as an energetic freelancer turning out high-risk-adventure travel stories alongside practical and provocative columns on the latest in exercise science. He could talk the talk as the science of endurance guy but also walk the walk—or run the run, given that he’d advanced to the Olympic trials in the 1500 metres before switching to hardly more pedestrian routines at the NSA, where he helped build vibrating silicon nano-bridges with the ultimate goal of developing a quantum computer that could hack into the secret world’s encrypted communications. How many more mountains did he need to conquer?

Helpful therapeutic types, full of good advice from a safe distance, will talk of creative dissatisfaction as if it were simply a useful and necessary stage on the path to higher achievement. Complacency is the enemy of originality, they will tell you, and habit-formed routine becomes creatively deadening. You need to explore to get anywhere new, ipso facto, but the maddening itch to deviate from the soporific norm all too often must begin—and all too often ends—with the funk of sleepless nights and the drag of disappointed days.



What compels us to venture high and low?

So it was with Hutchinson. The subtitle of his new book, *The Explorer's Gene: Why We Seek Big Challenges, New Flavors, and the Blank Spots on the Map*, suggests boundless release from overly predictable routine. More soberly, as if to balance out the sunny optimism that is the end point of most self-help quests, the striking black and white photograph on the book’s jacket shows a heavily laden mountaineer, tethered to a taut rope that disappears out of the frame, peering down into a steep crevasse with what could be wonderment or fear or just deep uncertainty.

Exploration begins with this sense of uneasiness. As his specialty narrowed, Hutchinson realized in the darker moments of late-night reflection, he had started losing the thrill of discovery, the uncertain pursuit of the not yet known that had provided him with so much pleasure in his wide-ranging formative years. By the time *Endure* appeared to great acclaim in 2018, he knew his subject exceedingly well: still in his early forties, he was well positioned for a stultifying if dependable career of writing on the same topics, repeating the same ideas, and monitoring learned journals for news of incremental scientific advances that might or might not make much difference to the sum of knowledge.

Yet Hutchinson was wary of making another career swerve, given his history of what the rest of us might consider serial overachieving but what he, with a harsher sense of self-awareness, viewed as a dilettantism that could easily veer from the quixotic to the pathological: “setting an audacious goal, spending years working

tirelessly toward it, and then, once success was within reach, walking away to pursue something completely different.”

◆
THE EXPLORER'S GENE IS NOT A MEMOIR PER SE, even if it begins with Hutchinson feeling panicky as he, his wife, and their young daughters tapped into their exploratory DNA by getting disoriented off-piste on a misty Newfoundland mountaintop and ends with an older, wiser dad peacefully kayaking with his children through the strip of urban wilderness that is Toronto’s Humber River, the serene end point of this particular hero’s mid-life quest. The science behind the compulsion to explore over thousands of years and across every continent and sea (and, more mundanely, to sample new commuter routes, exercise regimens, and Netflix options) is at the core of this story. Befitting the eager doctoral student he once was, Hutchinson positively wallows in any journal article or lab experiment that offers insight into the brain’s complex decision-making circuitry and the range of uncertainty-chasing behaviours it prompts, from venturing out into unknown waters beyond the horizon (Big Challenges!) to trying an unreviewed restaurant on the off chance that while it may well turn out to be worse than the standby pizza place, it may also be much better (New Flavours!).

And even if an unfamiliar menu item at the offbeat boîte disappoints (Hutchinson tells a funny story, instantly recognizable to peripatetic gourmands, of pointing to a random menu item

at a Spanish seaside café and being rewarded with an entire boiled octopus and nothing else), you can still experience the dopamine rush that equates with pleasure through your uncertainty-directed exploration (though brushing up on your Spanish might help to minimize randomness). It isn't so much the momentary experience of something enjoyable that spikes dopamine activity (responses to the chemical compound diminish when a pleasant sensation becomes habitual) as the anticipation of a reward greater than expected. Novelty seeking in itself stimulates pleasure. "We explore because we want something else more than we like what we already have," writes Hutchinson. "Dopamine is what drives that wanting. No matter how great the status quo is, it soon becomes predictable. To get the better-than-expected rewards that trigger our dopamine neurons, by definition, requires trying something new."

In the lab, monkeys whose dopamine levels have been artificially elevated immediately increase their exploratory behaviour. But how does that observation connect with a Polynesian navigator heading out into the featureless ocean or a migrant risking everything to find a new life on the other side of the world or even a restless journalist like Hutchinson, who passed up the Taj Mahal while covering the Commonwealth Games to wander through the serpentine alleyways of Old Delhi in search of a route to the seventeenth-century Red Fort, with a few bonus pakoras devoured along the way?

We're wired to explore, Hutchinson contends, even if most of us don't manage to break free from our habitual behaviours to seek the big challenges and search out the map's blank spots, no matter how persuasively the motivational handbooks urge us on. The possibility is there in all of us, and we may be better placed to achieve our true skill level by following Hutchinson's five guiding principles on how to explore better. Embrace the struggle, he tells us with his fifth principle: "The most challenging paths often turn out to feel the most meaningful — not in spite of the effort required, but because of it."

Still, we hesitate, almost as if we're just as wired not to take big risks that could lead to failure. GPS is so much easier than going by gut instinct. Struggle, effort, challenge — you can understand why our latent novelty-chasing neural circuits remain unactivated. It's possible that Hutchinson's perspective as a high-level distance runner with a doctorate who owns up to finding pleasure in navigating barren

wilderness in horrible weather with exhausted children in his muddy wake might lead him to overestimate his readers' zeal for the tougher side of exploration. But then I think of my own most vivid travel memories, and they invariably involve a combination of struggle, effort, and challenge (some self-imposed but much of it, I must admit, blindly stumbled into) — with an intense mental engagement that matched the physical demands and made the vacationing whole greater than the sum of the very trying and sometimes worrying parts.

"Wasn't it fun," I ask my daughter, who like the Hutchinson brood has learned how to embrace the effort-filled, unexpected swerves, often as the sun is about to set, "when we had to ford that swollen river on the walk to San Gimignano?" She counters by asking, "Do you remember when we got lost climbing up Mount Pelion, and a hunter gave us a lift, and his rifle was sticking into my leg, and you made us jump out when you realized he was going in the wrong direction?" Of course I remember — and then we found the elusive turnoff by overriding our misleading trail notes, climbed three separate peaks of the mountain where the centaurs of Greek legend lived, and walked home in the dark along a steep gorge in time to pick up stewed beef and potatoes from the local taverna before claiming an olive-wood Three Peaks medallion in recognition of our heroic feats.

Hutchinson's argument for the rewards of challenge seeking holds true, even if the struggle embraces us more often than we choose to embrace it. Certain people seem born to exploration's novelty seeking, though, with the innate predisposition to the dopamine rush that gives *The Explorer's Gene* its title. Early humans certainly wandered purposefully as part of a tribe, seeking new food sources, escaping enemies, battling the elements. Then came a sudden, sweeping expansion of far-flung migration, when "anatomically and behaviorally modern humans — the ones whose descendants settled the rest of the world — left Africa and the Near East around fifty thousand years ago."

♦

THE COMPULSION TO EXPAND TERRITORY AND move far beyond the boundaries of the familiar has been equated with an intellectual and technological adaptability that made all *Homo sapiens* better able to confront the unknown. But someone had to be the leader of everyone else, and someone had to be the restless (or deranged, in the eyes of unevolved types more

resistant to endless novelty seeking) adventurer who said, "Why stop here?"

Hutchinson homes in on a genetic variant affecting a dopamine receptor in the brain called DRD4, which is associated with thrill-seeking, attention deficit hyperactivity, and (at the lab-rat level at least) exploratory behaviour. One study, focusing on a variant that seemed to be more prevalent in children with ADHD, noted wide geographical differences in the prevalence of DRD4. The variation could be assumed to be the result of random mutations, but the developmental psychologist Chuansheng Chen wondered whether the distribution of a gene associated with novelty seeking could actually be linked to the exploratory urges underlying migration in the distant past.

By studying the migration routes and genetic data of numerous population groups, Chen found that the longer the migration, the greater the increase in DRD4: for example, among the Ticuna of Colombia, whose migration from northern Asia had covered 18,000 kilometres, 78 percent of the population had the so-called explorer's gene. And surely it's more than a coincidence that this mutation emerged at the beginnings of the Great Human Expansion, when our formerly clustered ancestors set out to populate the entire habitable world.

Appropriately for a book that incorporates the DRD4 variant into its title, traditional explorers take pride of place in the storytelling. Sadly, we don't have access to their specific DNA. Besides, their highly mixed motives for wandering and sometimes arbitrary methods of vagabondage likely wouldn't fit the tidier experiments that scientists set up to test exploration-related spatial concepts like stimulus-response navigation and cognitive mapping.

Consider Alexander Mackenzie. When he searched for a river outlet to the Pacific Ocean in 1789, hoping to find a more efficient route to ship back to Europe the furs he'd been acquiring in western Canada, he found an ocean (which he mistook for a lake) via the river now named after him (though it's said that he himself called it the River Disappointment). Alas, it was the wrong ocean: the Arctic.

From one perspective, and perhaps even in Mackenzie's own view, the expedition was a failure. For an exploration theorist, however, it retains many of the elements of a resounding success, or at least of a hypothesis exemplified and vindicated. Why did Mackenzie persist, to his peril, as the huge river veered northward into uncharted territory and his supplies for the lengthening return trip ran low? Having vividly delineated the epic journey with a travel writer's flair and a historian's capacity to conjure up the living moment, Hutchinson steps back, puts on his scientist's cap, and parses the trader's professed justifications for his risky quest according to the academic psychologist Daniel Berlyne's standard evaluation criteria for the motivations underlying exploration: "internal predisposing factors, pursuit of rewards and biological utility, ludic behavior."

These generalizing theoretical terms sound cold, remote, and unsatisfying in this context. (By "ludic behavior," does he mean playfulness or risk taking?) But what Hutchinson is trying to do in league with the myriad scientists he cites is to bridge the gap between the lab and the road less travelled, between the rigorous detachment of tightly controlled experiments

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and the unbounded humans who don't always realize how useful they are in establishing nuanced theories of behaviour and supplying a real-world test for tentative (though often too confidently voiced) conclusions drawn from the lab rats' maze.

In describing Mackenzie's meandering journey, Hutchinson takes a cue from his subject matter and avoids the predictable direct route in his narrative—or "stimulus-response" navigation. Instead he lets his own intuitive but deeply informed cognitive mapping take over in a sort of intellectual grand tour that is characteristic of his book's elaborate style. We start with Alexander Mackenzie, thirty-seven days into his canoe voyage, waiting for the northern sun to set after a sixteen-hour day of paddling so that he can establish where he might be positioned within the unknown realm he has entered. We hear, in passing, about Captain James Cook's innovative use of a chronometer to determine the longitude of the continent's west coast and to locate a possible outlet to the Pacific for fur traders like Mackenzie. We slide into a discussion of how humans calculate uncertainty and risk in the search for a big payout—going beyond the limits of the mapped world in Mackenzie's case. Donald Rumsfeld's famous commentary at a 2002 Pentagon press conference that distinguished "known unknowns" from "unknown unknowns" is brought into play, with references to economists like John Maynard Keynes who sought to understand the fundamental difference between uncertainties with known probabilities and those where the probability is unclear or unknowable.

Then we pivot suddenly to Daniel Ellsberg, the military analyst who leaked the top secret Pentagon Papers and an economics researcher with an interest in the various strains of uncertainty. The paradox named after him posits that people prefer a choice with a risk, which he defined as uncertainty that can be calculated, rather than one that is ambiguous, where the uncertainty can't be quantified—even when the betting odds might favour the option where the outcome is harder to predict. Ellsberg later studied the effect of ambiguity on Cold War decision making: When is the right time to launch nuclear warheads? Then it's back to Mackenzie's world of Arctic uncertainty, where the potential rewards of a route to the Pacific overcame any ambiguity aversion the explorer already familiar with the limits of the known knowns might have faced by heading into uncharted territory. Deep breath—and on to a computational cognitive scientist's invention of a modified two-armed-bandit casino game to "tease apart the respective influences of ambiguity, uncertainty, and reward."

Hutchinson's extended digression takes us next to an experimental psychologist's study that compares "the effects of ambiguity, reward, and information gain on explore-exploit choices in pre-schoolers" (hint: it involves marbles chosen from various boxes). And then it's back to Mackenzie, venturing into the unknown again four years after his first voyage—and this time finding his roundabout way to the Pacific.

I likened it to a grand tour, but that's too stiff and stately. Reading Hutchinson at his most cerebral and allusive feels more like being in a cab racing through the back streets of an unfamiliar city, even if as a passenger you can feel a bit lost and unsure about where you're

going to end up. Eventually each journey must reach an end, and then you're left with the question that every explorer inevitably wonders about in the late, too-quiet nights of self-examination: What will I do next? Mackenzie dithered for a while, set aside the journals he hoped to turn into a book, and settled into the more ordinary life of a Montreal furrier, before finally hiring someone to polish his travel stories into publishable prose. Fame followed almost naturally, for such was the appetite for tales of endurance and wonder on the outer edges of discovery.

Hutchinson's own explorations followed a different course. The inner conflict he faced after *Endure*, between settling down to do what he did well—and being content with what he already knew—and tearing off into the unknown in pursuit of some risky reward that may never come epitomizes what researchers call the explore-exploit dilemma. It's a wholly familiar tension in the business world, more easily resolved when you keep doing the same thing, working with the knowledge and resources you already possess in the limited time available, rather than pursuing an uncertain reward you may never attain. Think of all those look-alike sequels that Hollywood churns out, and you can understand the appeal, and the limitations, of the exploitative mindset.

The emphasis in *The Explorer's Gene*, quite naturally, is on exploration, both its motivation and its rewards. And the Alex Hutchinson at the beginning of the book, unable to resist a misty, mucky, bug-infested Newfoundland wilderness, displays many of the characteristics of the hell-bent explorer. By the end, after he's teased out the scientific complexities of his theme, Hutchinson comes to recognize that the point of choosing the unknown over the habitual is to gain knowledge, supersede randomness, and refine uncertainty so that you can make better choices in the future. Why not improve the odds at the casino so you can reap the rewards? Explore, but then exploit.

It may sound demeaning to categorize *The Explorer's Gene* as a personal-growth book, though I suppose that might increase sales. But it's not surprising that the urban pastoral setting of its final chapter feels like the contented end of a long and sometimes arduous odyssey, with a father and his maturing daughters floating in their kayaks and studying sun-bathed turtles as they bask on the trunk of a fallen tree. It's a comforting image that encapsulates the knowledge gained from wide-ranging exploration, both physical and intellectual.

As you'd expect from a writer and thinker with Hutchinson's gifts, there's more to it than that. He grew up along the banks of the very same river, and when he was the age of his turtle-observing daughters, he and his friends played their own exploration games in their local version of the wilderness: an oasis effectively created, or recreated, in the aftermath of a devastating hurricane that flooded the built-up valley, carried away entire houses, and killed dozens.

The parkland that the tragedy produced, within steps of Hutchinson's home, with smooth paths where he heads out for quick morning runs, is named after Étienne Brûlé, an adventurous young comrade of Samuel de Champlain and the first European to see the Great Lakes. The Humber River in Brûlé's time was already a busy Indigenous trading route, hardly the

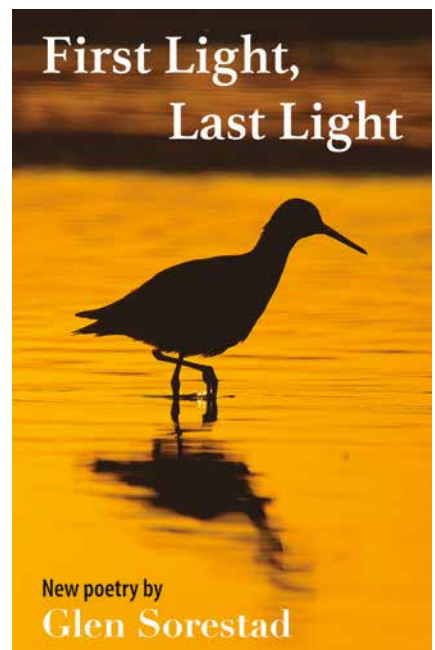
great unknown, but wilderness is in the eye of the beholder, and for Brûlé, as for Hutchinson several centuries later, the feeling of solitude and the ambient sense of uncertainty that are instrumental to the explorer's quest were potent and exciting.

"The thrill of exploration really does persist even when others have preceded you," Hutchinson writes. There aren't many blank spots left on the map. Maybe that's not so bad if it becomes an incentive to seek out the everyday counterparts to exploration's thrills and rewards—to exploit and refine and use the knowledge you've picked up in a life of searches and swerves. Facing the domestic challenges and incipient disappointments and well-worn routines of middle age, Hutchinson turned back to the lessons of science he'd been considering as he wrote *The Explorer's Gene* and realized that there was not just a mathematical proof but a psychological case for knowing when to stop exploring on the grander scale that untrammelled wilderness and dilettantish career moves offer.

EXPLORATION ISN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE. IT'S BEEN given a bad name by the superrich going where no grotesquely wealthy person has gone before, cutting the queue on Everest, burrowing down to the bottom of the Atlantic in a submersible for a peek at the *Titanic*, or shooting fairly high up into what can barely be defined as space on a ten-minute tour.

So maybe it's time to say finis to the Final Frontier and stick closer to home, as Hutchinson has discovered with his daughters in the marshes of the meandering Humber. There are blank spots all around you, once you start looking. ▲

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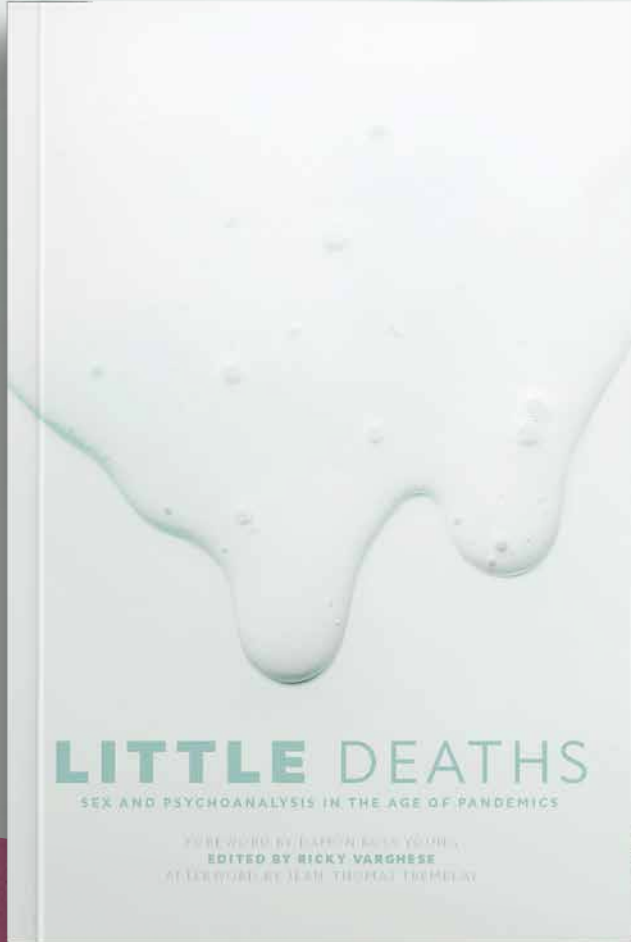


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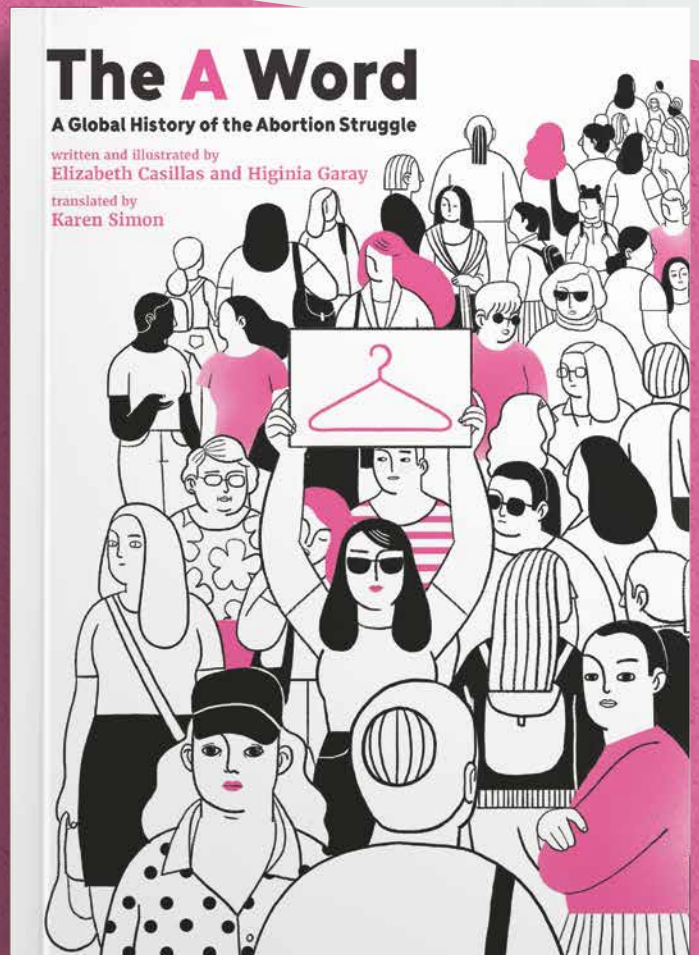
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Survey Says

Nationalism in so many words

Catherine Khordoc

Les mots de la nation: États-Unis, France, Angleterre, Écosse, Canada, Québec

Jocelyn Létourneau with Raphaël Gani

Presses de l'Université de Montréal

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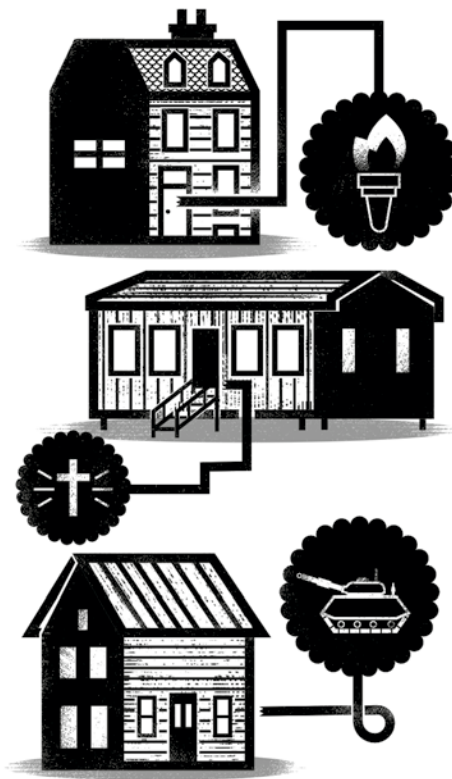
NATIONALISM IS HAVING A moment — at least in Canada. As I write this from my home in Ottawa, a reinvigorated pride in this country is palpable.

People who were not feeling especially celebratory in recent years are eager to make it clear that we are a sovereign, independent country. There's no talk of a fifty-first state in these parts, unless it is to mock the mere thought of it. In Vancouver, where I was travelling recently, people seemed unusually enthusiastic about Canada and were asking, "What's it like to live in Mark Carney's Ottawa?" A special issue of *Maclean's* is themed "The New Nationalism: Portrait of Canada at Its Crossroads" and features articles on how we can and must resist American encroachment on our territory, resources, politics, and culture. Similarly, *The Conversation* has been publishing articles on how our symbols of nationalism are evolving, including Canadian flags, the sales of which have "skyrocketed." Indeed, as Norman Hillmer has put it in these pages, Canadian nationalism is seeing an "explosion."

This wave of heightened nationalism makes it a particularly good time to read *Les mots de la nation* (The words of the nation), which the historian Jocelyn Létourneau has written with the help of his Université Laval colleague Raphaël Gani. Létourneau's research is based on surveys conducted in the United States, France, England, Scotland, Canada, and Quebec in the fall of 2011. Adult respondents were asked to summarize, in a few phrases, the history of their nation up to the present day. Létourneau analyzes the significant words that were used frequently for each country, then discusses them using a comparative approach. The many lists, tables, and word clouds throughout this book identify the number of distinct terms in the survey responses, those mentioned at least nine times, the proportion of respondents using the most common lingo, and so on.

It may not sound rigorous, let alone gripping, to write about the expressions that come to mind when individuals in various places are asked to talk about their history. It is, however, quite fascinating to consider and reflect on the words that are mentioned by "ordinary people," as Létourneau calls them. Two of the middle chapters are particularly thought-provoking. In them, Létourneau identifies and discusses some of the words common to all six nations, as well as

those that seem more specific to one or another. For example, "war," "great," "fighting," "world," "freedom," and "religion" were mentioned by a large number of people regardless of country. This suggests that national pride continues to exist, even if respondents were also critical, illustrated through words such as "decline," "crisis," and "weakening." The chapter on the "lexical differences," the longest in this relatively short book, is also compelling. This is where Létourneau's expertise and knowledge of historical contexts shine light on the data. In some cases, the same word appears in different survey results, but an understanding of relative context allows it to be interpreted in very nuanced ways.



Certain phrases come to mind.

Consider "freedom," which is, perhaps not surprisingly, most often seen in the U.S. results and laden with significance, given the libertarian views held by so many Americans. In contrast, "freedom" is far from the top in the French data — landing in the thirteenth position — despite the national motto of "Liberté, égalité, fraternité." Perhaps confirming the stereotype of France as a nation of complainers, among the common terms are "war," "misfortune," and "decline," leading Létourneau to cite a 2016 study by Marcel Gauchet about the French being the "champions of pessimism and disgruntlement."

Words related to colonialism and imperialism also come up, particularly among English and

Scottish respondents. In England, such terminology suggests that there is both a sense of nostalgia for and condemnation of the former empire. Létourneau sees support here for one of his hypotheses: that vocabulary that characterizes a nation does not erase diverse and opposing ideological positions.

Létourneau's analysis of Canadian data excludes Quebec, which he discusses separately. Language most commonly used to describe Canada's history appears to emphasize agreement and harmony, with "peaceful," "welcoming," "together," and "compromise" being high on the list, alongside terms pertaining to diversity. Those relating to First Nations and to French are also statistically significant. In Quebec, the most frequently mentioned word is "Canada," which, as Létourneau explains, is not surprising, given the province's status within Confederation and how its history is inextricably intertwined with Canada's, regardless of one's views on sovereignty. "Victims" is also up there.

LES MOTS DE LA NATION IS BOTH ENJOYABLE AND stimulating, though a few thoughts did niggle at me as I pondered whether the way various terms were grouped and analyzed may have served to confirm preconceived notions about a nation, rather than, as Létourneau suggests, serving to define it. Put another way, can words give shape to what the political scientist Benedict Anderson called "imagined communities"?

Létourneau also provides a somewhat limited discussion on the demographics of respondents, justifying his approach in part by stating that some words are used so commonly that they define a nation across ages, genders, and incomes, even if there are subtle variations in meaning. It is nonetheless surprising that "slavery" does not rank very high on the American list, and "racism" doesn't appear at all. Létourneau concedes that there were far more white than non-white respondents, and it is difficult to accept that this imbalance has not influenced the words that define the United States according to this methodology. Furthermore, we do not know if Canadian respondents included francophones, if anglophones were in the Quebec data, or, for that matter, if the respondents were all citizens or permanent residents. Finally, the surveys were conducted fourteen years ago. Would the results have differed if they'd been conducted five years ago, to say nothing of earlier this year? The question is particularly relevant given the changes in the world in recent months, but even at a more general level, some deeper reflections on how the very notion of nationhood changes over time would have helped to contextualize the stakes involved.

The Gorta Mór

When the blight spread

Michael Ledger-Lomas

Rot: An Imperial History of the Irish Famine

Padraic X. Scanlan

Basic Books

352 pages, hardcover, ebook, and audiobook

QUEEN VICTORIA KNEW WHAT TO blame for the potato famine that killed a million people in Ireland: “The heedless & improvident way in which the poor Irish have long lived.” Republican nationalists, by contrast, called her the Famine Queen and alleged that her heartless regime had shipped food from the island while people starved. Padraic X. Scanlan’s *Rot: An Imperial History of the Irish Famine* wisely avoids this old blame game. Scanlan, who teaches at the University of Toronto, notes that the potato blight that first struck in 1845 was a European event, which also killed hundreds of thousands from Belgium to Prussia. The question is why a borderless natural disaster became a famine in Ireland. What distinctive “structures” made its impact so prolonged and deadly there? In answering that question, Scanlan has given us a uniquely grim and illuminating account of Anglo-Irish relations.

Scanlan’s Ireland was not quite a colony. He is skeptical of the folk idea that the Irish suffered because the British treated them as uppity natives. Early on, Scanlan writes not of the potato fields but of Irish officers carousing in the Crown colony of Ceylon, underscoring how many Irish were expanding Victoria’s realms when the famine struck. “The British Islands,” as the architects of the United Kingdom had boasted, “constitute *one* Empire.” In the decades after the 1800 Acts of Union, Ireland was economically and politically integrated with Britain: there was one parliament and one church, as well as a single currency and a free market. Roman Catholics had been emancipated from the elaborate legal bindings that had made them second-class citizens.

Yet these changes had not lifted the dead weight of past injustice; they actually deepened the economic asymmetry with Britain. The Tudor conquest of Ireland, its invasion by Oliver Cromwell in 1649, and the penal laws that made it impossible for Catholics to inherit property had pushed most of the population into landlessness. By the time of Victoria’s reign, just under 4,000 people, most of them Protestant, owned 80 percent of Irish land. In a mainly agricultural society, everyone else had to rent fields from others or else labour for them, leaving most Irish dependent on revenues from the export of food to Britain. Even prosperous dairy farmers rarely tasted the butter that they churned,

because they had to sell all of it to pay their rent. And rent tended to rise in step with population growth, even as commodity prices fluctuated.

The cultivation of potatoes had taken off in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries because the tubers, originally from the Americas, could feed an immiserated people. Potatoes were filling and made for a fairly complete if monotonous diet when eaten with the buttermilk left over from the dairy trade plus “kitchen”: whatever foraged fixings people could find, from herring to seaweed. Landless labourers could grow potatoes of their own by “taking conacre,” working tiny plots on short-term leases. Roughly 75 percent of the food that they ate came from



The National Famine Memorial, in Murrisk.

such patches. Potato peelings fattened the hogs that labourers sold to pay rent, taxes, and other expenses. These living piggy banks illustrate how relentlessly the Irish worked for Britain: before the famine struck (and ruined the swine trade overnight), a people who infrequently tasted meat were selling about half a million of the animals (especially the fatty Berkshire pig) a year.

The British mocked the Irish as archaic “potatophagi”—a race addicted to an easy food that allowed them to marry young and have too many children without thought of the future. Such victim blaming distorted responses to the blight, a pathogen that reduced potatoes to inedible mush and was particularly deadly because it destroyed crops in storage pits as

well as in the ground. But Scanlan acquits the British state on charges of “starvation crime,” in part because its officials borrowed and spent heavily to get food into Ireland. As prime minister, Robert Peel imported 44 million pounds of American maize when the potato first failed, thinking it could feed nearly half a million people for three months. (The Irish struggled to cook “Peel’s brimstone,” a claggy foodstuff with which they were unfamiliar.) Civil society joined in, as well. The Queen, for example, championed the British Association, “a clearinghouse for publicity and donations.” Among those who supported its operations were enslaved people in Alabama and the Choctaw Nation. Yet such efforts were never sustained or extensive enough to reach those at the margins of society, especially when the blight reappeared in subsequent years. Scanlan coolly records their desperate shifts to survive and their agonizing deaths.

Fiscal constraints limited further action by the central state: the City worried that the loans it contracted to buy American food were draining Britain’s gold. So did political orthodoxies. Officials could not shed the assumption that the Irish needed to be reformed rather than merely rescued. Charles Trevelyan, the Treasury man who masterminded the relief effort, cast the famine as an intervention by divine providence, which could force the Irish off the potato and into a capitalist economy (never mind that they were already its victims). John Russell, who succeeded Peel, put his faith in public works, which paid the starving to learn industry. When road-building schemes proved too expensive and prone to distort the economy, workhouses funded by Irish ratepayers took up the civilizing mission, feeding people who toiled at such pointless tasks as stone breaking. Some workhouses complained of running out of stones.

Landlords grew tired of paying for these lessons and adopted a more brutal course: evicting struggling farmers (and their many subtenants), “unroofing” (destroying) their cottages, and turning over the land to wheat, oats, or sheep. The state backed them by harshly policing communities that responded with violence. The ensuing emigration of six million people in the following decades, which also made the famine part of North American history, reduced pressure on the land and on that “capricious staple” the potato, even as the blight dwindled (though it remains endemic to Ireland). Scanlan, who has a gimlet eye for macabre detail, tells us that the first emigrants went as living ballast in grain ships returning to North America. This Swiftian reduction of people to stuff captures what the famine tells us not just about the British empire but about the dangers awaiting any society that loses control of its economic destiny. ▲

Art of the Deals

Negotiating trade through culture

Tim Cook

Trading on Art: Cultural Diplomacy and Free Trade in North America

Sarah E. K. Smith

UBC Press

296 pages, hardcover, softcover, and ebook

AS GUY PLAMONDON, THE CANADIAN cultural affairs consul in New York City, told the *Ottawa Citizen*, “Americans don’t know us as well as we know them.” Plamondon made the seemingly obvious remark in April 1981 as he launched a new initiative in the Lower Manhattan neighbourhood of SoHo. Known as 49th Parallel, the federally funded centre would feature experimental art, video installations, and even performances. The gallery closed in June 1992, having been plagued by skepticism. Was it a wise use of taxpayers’ money? Was it telling the right stories about Canada? Did anyone care? Indeed, Americans did not seem to know much more about their northern neighbour after a decade of exhibitions, save for perhaps an elite group of New Yorkers. Many other attempts to “show that we have people who compare easily” to their southern counterparts yielded equally slim results.

The use of art to explain Canada and to strengthen its culture was not new, of course. Ottawa had used artists and their works as sword and shield over the decades: sword to carve out an identity and shield to protect us from the American onslaught that surged over the airwaves and across screens. But the reliance on artists as ambassadors seemed especially urgent during the divisive and fraught free trade negotiations of the 1980s. The costs of embracing the United States in a big-hug deal could be fatal, opponents warned. If tariffs and protective barriers were removed and if markets were opened, Canada could lose what made it unique and, ultimately, sovereign.

Sarah E. K. Smith, who holds a Canada Research Chair in the Faculty of Information and Media Studies at Western University, in Ontario, examines the entwined themes of late twentieth-century trade agreements, diplomacy, and artistic production with *Trading on Art: Cultural Diplomacy and Free Trade in North America*. She explores how Canada presented itself to the U.S. and then navigated an even more complex relationship that included Mexico, after the North American Free Trade Agreement came into effect in 1994. Free trade brought the three nations together, but culture conjoins hearts and minds. Art is grounded in empathy, and the nuances of foreign relations, proponents of artistic soft power believed, would be made less thorny by helping the partners to know one another.

In this timely book, Smith includes numerous case studies to “show that the Canadian government espoused an ambiguous position” through cultural diplomacy. “Even as it insisted that cultural products be excluded from free trade negotiations,” she writes, “it simultaneously mobilized cultural products (including visual art) to project nationalism, strengthen ties with the United States and Mexico, and communicate trade relationships to the public.” Smith’s study would have been strengthened by a framing chapter to situate cultural diplomacy efforts under Brian Mulroney and his predecessors. How did officials forge a coherent strategy and then unleash it across sectors, for example?



Somewhere near Ottawa and West Broadway.

Without this background, Smith’s discussion is unmoored at times. It’s easy to forget why the artists she presents have relatively limited name recognition and are not the Group of Seven, Painters Eleven, or the Automatistes. And why she considers genres that are marginal at best, including video art.

While the medium was hot, responsive, and easy to produce, little video art from the period has stood the test of time. Among the best works is Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak’s *White Dawn*, from 1988. In the playful nine-minute video, an American wakes up to find that Canadian “cultural imperialism” has infected his country and his life, with Bruce Cockburn and Anne Murray ruling the radio. It is a cute but not

earth-shattering concept that reminds us of the ubiquity of American media. Yet the inclusion of *White Dawn* detracts from Smith’s thesis that cultural diplomacy helped to promote “continental integration in free trade’s wake.” Steele and Tomczak, like many other artists, were actively warning *against* closer ties with the U.S.

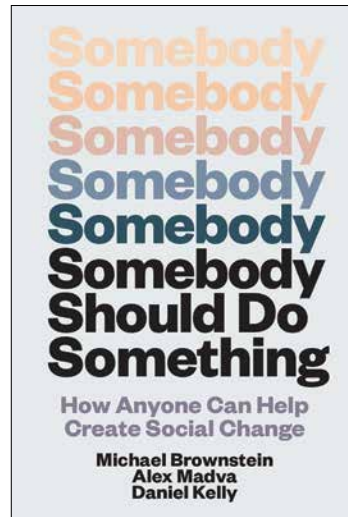
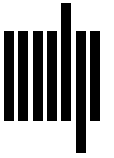
Smith is on more solid ground when assessing the shifting relationship between Canada, Mexico, and the U.S. In exhibitions mounted in Ottawa, Montreal, Toronto, and elsewhere, Frida Kahlo stole the show. As the star in a wave of “Fridamania,” she raised the profile of Mexican heritage. A strength of this book is Smith’s material on Mexico and how the country positioned itself as a North American nation through trade and culture. “Mexico has switched continents,” quipped one journalist. Curators and administrators alike aimed to promote connection, as revealed through various policy documents and statements that Smith has nicely mined.

Less present here are the voices of artists reacting to how their works were deployed in campaigns of cultural persuasion. The anti-imperialist and anti-materialist Kahlo might have snarled at how her likeness and paintings were used to foster trade and diplomacy, though such is the fate of artists whose works live on long after them.

IF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IS ABOUT SHAPING ONE’S narrative with others, Canadian diplomats might again reinvest in the long game of supporting all types of artists as the country reels from the current trade war. Trade agreements were updated in 2018 when Donald Trump demanded changes to NAFTA in his first term as president. At the time, many were staggered by the bullying. Now Trump derides as a terrible deal the Canada–United States–Mexico Agreement that his first administration negotiated.

In an age of vulgarity, bad faith, threats, and lies, Canadians have not immediately turned to artists to tell the Americans who we are. Flags are flying, elbows are raised, and pride is on display, on and off the ice. Yet Ottawa’s all-of-government approach in fending off the U.S. seems to be missing a cultural arm, or even a finger. While the achievements of cultural diplomacy are difficult to assess, Smith reminds us that it is another means of engaging Americans and convincing them that Canada is an autonomous nation with its own culture beyond beavers, health care, and poutine. Artists can help share our story in ways that supersede the almighty dollar — as truth tellers who reveal the complexity of what it means to be Canadian. ▲

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That Book Is Dangerous!

How Moral Panic, Social Media, and the Culture Wars Are Remaking Publishing

[Adam Szetela](#)

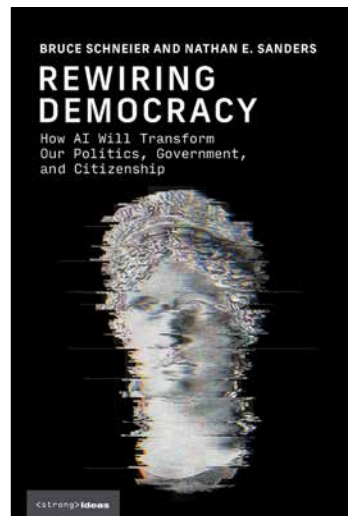
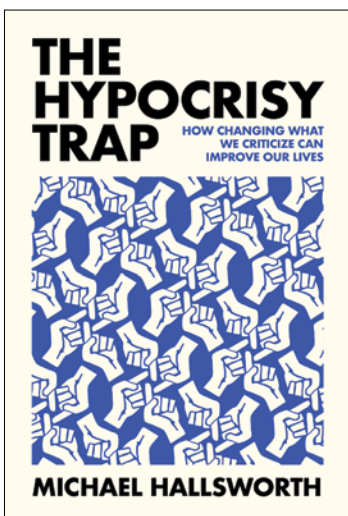
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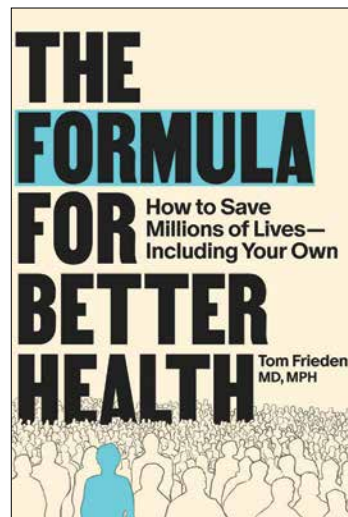
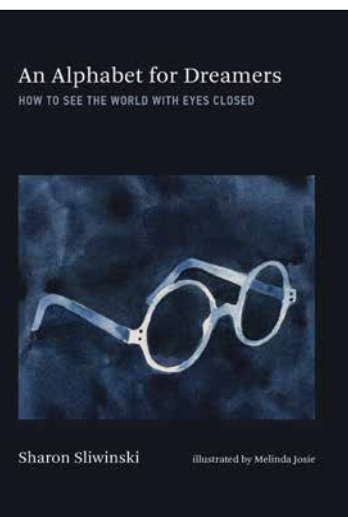
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With Strings Attached

Putting a price on that Stradivarius

J. R. Patterson

A Cultural History of the Violin in Nineteenth-Century London: From Instrument to Art

Tom Wilder

Boydell Press

316 pages, hardcover and ebook

IN MARCH 2025, AN ANONYMOUS BUYER purchased the 1715 “Baron Knoop” Stradivarius for \$23 million (U.S.), making it the most expensive violin ever sold. (The seller, the American stringed-instrument collector David L. Fulton, had purchased it for a more modest \$2.75 million in 1992.) Previous record setters have included the 1721 “Lady Blunt,” which fetched \$15.9 million in 2011, and the “Joachim-Ma,” which went for \$11.25 million in February 2025.

All three of these models were made by Antonio Stradivari, a Cremonese luthier whose output in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is said to epitomize perfection in violin manufacturing. Depending on your point of view, they may indeed be examples of flawless human handiwork. Or they might be, as the fiction writer and journalist Ambrose Bierce once put it, objects that “tickle human ears by friction of a horse’s tail on the entrails of a cat.” Either way, where do these exorbitant value judgments come from?

Tom Wilder looks for the answers through the wider cultural world that brought the violin to prominence after its development in the sixteenth century and laid the stage for it to become the most iconic instrument of Western music: a physical manifestation of “taste, refinement, and wealth.” The guitar may exist on a similarly high level of symbolism, but the appraisal of an individual six-string turns more on its provenance and on any alterations by famous owners than on the maker. As two examples, an acoustic Gibson owned by John Lennon sold for \$2.4 million in 2015, while the 1959 Martin D-18E that Kurt Cobain used on Nirvana’s *MTV Unplugged in New York* album went for just over \$6 million in 2020 (he had picked it up for just \$5,000). Pricey, but not near the numbers a Stradivarius commands.

As one of the world’s busiest ports, a centre of global finance, and the largest city in Europe, nineteenth-century London was the destination for musicians looking to join a growing orchestral landscape, teach affluent students, and make a name for themselves. Into this urban hullabaloo they brought their Continental instruments, including those crafted in Cremona, Italy.

Music had to that point been shaded with raucousness in so-called free and easies: public



Socrate Barozzi (right) bought his Stradivarius from Alfred Hill of W.E. Hill & Sons in 1923.

entertainment rooms with shows supplied by amateurs. Spurred by the influx of higher-calibre musicians, Wilder explains, “the civilizing of industrial society — meaning its lower classes — was to be achieved through the suppression of traditionally popular (though barbarous) pastimes, and their replacement by ‘endless sources of rational amusement.’” There emerged two conjoined ideas: that music was a “respectabilizing activity” and that it ought, therefore, to be morally uplifting.

And so the lowly fiddle received a reputation overhaul, transmogrified through the wiles of teachers, dealers, and performers from a symbol of sin and avarice (the “devil’s own instrument”) to an emblem of skill and high culture, the model for civilized recreation. In the Royal Albert and other purpose-built concert halls, great symphonies by European composers such as Haydn and Mozart were performed. Across the upper social strata, salon concerts and music lessons became a decorous pastime, with well-to-dos (including Anne Blunt, Baroness Wentworth, who was not the original owner of the Stradivarius that bears her name, though she had it for three decades) relying upon the appraisals of luthiers, auctioneers, and firms like W.E. Hill & Sons to provide the best instruments they could afford.

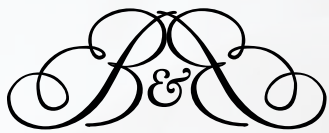
Around the same time, arts and crafts, once considered interchangeable concepts, were diverging. Crafts — with which violin making had largely been allied — became “associated with the body and lowly physical labor, while

the fine arts were linked with a higher, contemplative pleasure.” Societal opinion had shifted not just musical tastes but the creation of the instrument into the realm of art.

AS WITH ALL ART, THE PUBLIC IMAGINATION IS AN important factor when ascribing quality. Beginning in the nineteenth century, Wilder argues, it was the “communal judgment of a largely middle-class public that now defined cultural borders and values that conformed to a new concept of the artistic masterwork — an absolute, sacrosanct, musical text that contained within itself the life force of its master creator.” Then followed the rise and rise of the indisputable master — in the high-concept compositions of Beethoven, the rediscovery of Bach, and the establishment of the “Old Master” in the sphere of painting.

Concurrently with these ideas came various forms of institutional gatekeeping. In classrooms, general repertoire moved away from contemporary works and took on a historical dimension. Already by 1870, concert halls had become museums of sound, with most performed repertoire written by dead composers. “Contemporary composers, like contemporary violin makers,” Wilder writes, “were expected to bow down before their more distinguished predecessors.”

Those antecedents had been cemented by W.E. Hill & Sons as much as by the Cremonese families, notably the Amati, Guarneri, and Stradivari households. Profiting from the great



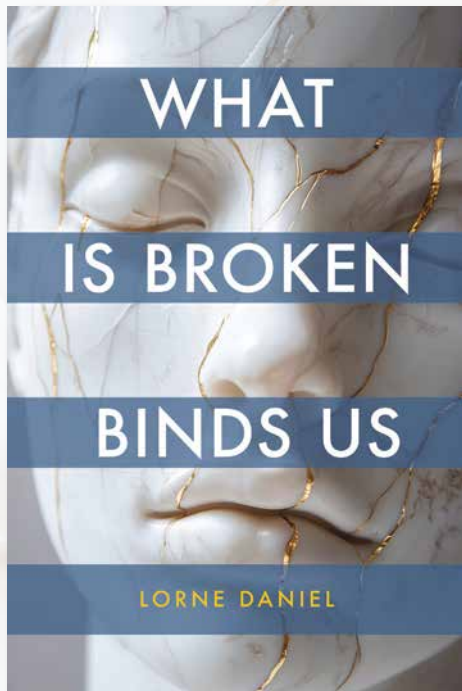
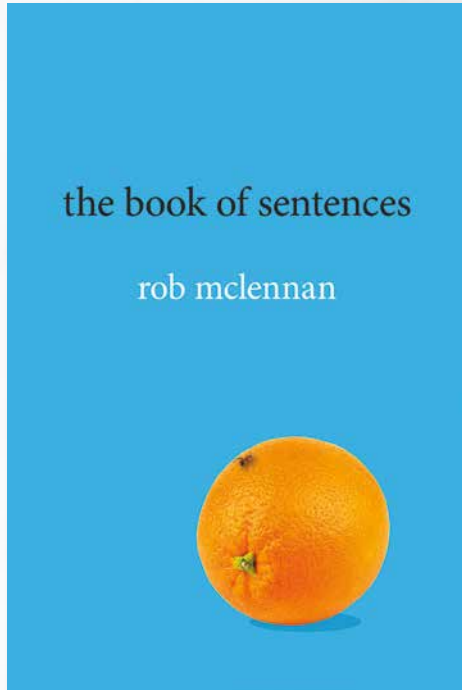
UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
Press

Highly sophisticated and accomplished.

—DENNIS COOLEY

rob mclennan is one of the best prose and monostich poets writing today, in part because he works so attentively with the fragment, as a ceramic collage artist works with the smallest shards of porcelain.

—HAN VANDERHART

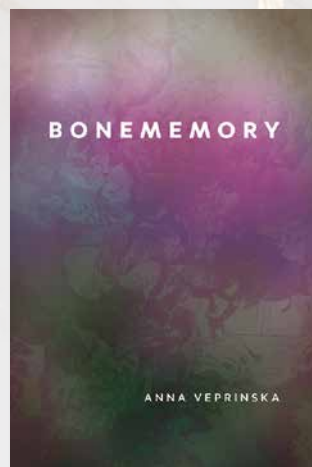
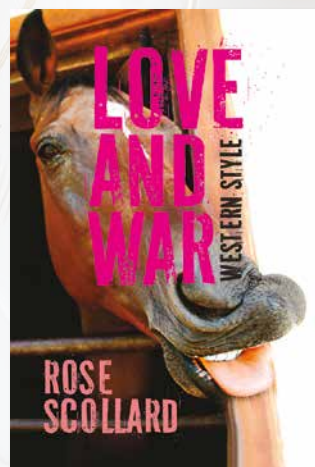
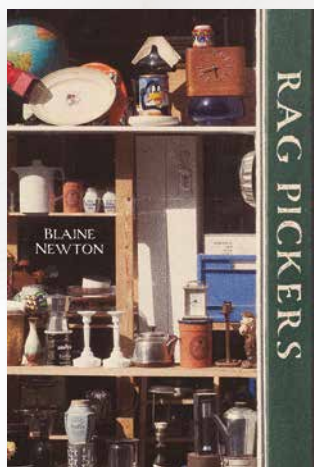


What is Broken Binds Us shows why Daniel is a poet we can trust.

—BRUCE HUNTER,
author of *Galestro*

Confronts readers with the complexities of life and loss with a raw honesty and lyrical beauty.

—PUNEET DUTT,
author of *The Better Monsters*



man theory of history, these luthiers were perceived to have natural abilities and characteristics that led their creations to become definitive in their field. Indeed, modern violins are largely “artistically derivative” copies of those predecessors: “the product of a protoindustrial process based on an internal mold conceived to ensure consistency.” As Wilder notes, a violin’s worth became less associated with its physical or tonal qualities than with the abstract notions of creativity, genius, and authenticity. Any with a Cremonese pedigree became what the art critic John Berger called a “spiritualized possession.” This is not solely because the public is gullible, or the art world crazy; the urge to own possessions and exhibit ourselves through them is deep-seated in all of us.

To have or play a violin created by a recognized master confirmed one’s reputation and gilded the music brought forth from horsehair and catgut. As the Canadian violinist James Ehnes writes in the foreword to *A Cultural History of the Violin in Nineteenth-Century London*, “The objective beauty of a finely crafted and useful tool becomes enhanced by qualities that are not inherent to the object, but rather to the art that it is capable of producing. Violins become ‘bold,’ ‘colorful,’ or ‘sweet.’”

Ehnes plays a Stradivarius, the 1715 “Marsick.” While speaking with me recently, ahead of a recital in Birmingham, England, he said that his violin is never out of his sight, nor is it ever played by anyone else. The paradox of the instruments’ overvaluation is not lost on him: “How did we get to this point, where a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century violin, manufactured to be a simple musician’s tool, can now sometimes sell for millions of dollars, often to be locked away in a safe or bank vault, its voice — the reason for its existence — silenced?”

Wilder, a seasoned luthier with Wilder & Davis Luthiers Inc., which has workshops in Montreal, Toronto, Banff, and Vancouver, writes with refreshing cynicism about the current scene, not sparing his colleagues and clients: “When today’s musicians demonstrate a continuing partiality for Cremonese masterworks, they are validating the verdicts of their mentors.” He notes that the Western canon “provided the bourgeoisie with the opportunity to wrap itself in history while simultaneously laying claim to artistic authority.” And he smacks down the artistic profession as being “largely about transmuting transcendence into pounds and pence.”

Although Wilder rightly rebukes the bloated language of modern auction houses as “clotted twaddle,” his own prose is something of an academic gray, thickened with sentences like “The alleged autonomous ‘thingness’ of works of canonical music assumes that true value is a function of the created thing itself.” Elsewhere he writes, “Consecration is about the power to impose legitimizing categories of perception and appreciation and to determine what has meaning and what has value — the very core of the production of culture.”

The name Stradivarius remains a part of the common lexicon, associated with concepts of excellence, craftsmanship, and wealth. The violins may be rare, excellently made, and, to some, worth the money. But none of that is actually worth a fig if their price outshines their purpose: to provide a little ear tickling and make it pleasurable to be inside your own head. ▲



Place to Place

A mother, her children, and the prairies

Cecily Ross

Naomi's Houses

Rosalie I. Tennison

Heritage House

288 pages, softcover and ebook

THE AMERICAN WRITER WILLIAM H. GASS once described autobiography as the “vulgar copulation” of history and fiction. Whether he overstated his case or not, there is little doubt that the genre sometimes gets things wrong. Witness Alice Sebold’s *Lucky*, which sent an innocent man to prison for sixteen years after its publication in 1999, and James Frey’s cancellation over his treatment of “the facts” in *A Million Little Pieces*, from 2003. Even Frank McCourt, whose 1996 tell-all, *Angela’s Ashes*, rocked the publishing world, came under scrutiny when some, including his mother, Angela, called him out for exaggerating his family’s poverty.

Now the memoir market is said to be saturated, and what was once a tsunami of titles is slowing to a trickle. Data from Publishers Marketplace, which covers the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada, shows that while book deals for fiction in the year leading up to November 2024 stood at 1,828, deals for memoir were a paltry 267. That represents a marked decline in the form since 2021.

So are the days of *Wild* and *Educated* over? Will readers no longer be expected to distinguish “my truth” from “the truth”? I, for one, hope so. There is something undeniably creepy and voyeuristic about our collective desire to be entertained by the often sordid details of other people’s lives. Considering the plethora of recently released titles in Canada, however, it seems that reports of the genre’s demise, in this country at least, may be greatly exaggerated. New memoirs include Scott Oake’s *For the Love of a Son*, Haley Mlotek’s *No Fault*, Cathrin Bradbury’s *This Way Up*, and Vinh Nguyen’s *The Migrant Rain Falls in Reverse*. Sarah Polley’s *Run Towards the Danger* and Ian Brown’s *Sixty* have enjoyed robust sales in recent years, so much so that Brown has written a sequel, *Seventy*, due out a year from now.

Of course, many memoirs are full of sensitivity and insight, and I’m sure that includes all of the above although I haven’t read any of them. Most are written in response to a deep need that humans, and writers especially, have to tell our stories, even if they may not be of interest (and, sadly, often are not) to anyone else. Despite my ambivalence, or perhaps because of it, I agreed to review a memoir for this magazine. The book in question, unlike the aforementioned titles, is not by a celebrated author or well-connected journalist. Nor is it published by one of the

so-called Big Five. Rosalie I. Tennison, the author of *Naomi’s Houses*, works in communications for the Faculty of Agriculture and Food Sciences at the University of Manitoba. Her account of growing up poor in northern Manitoba is published by an independent press based in British Columbia that is “committed to amplifying the stories and voices of the extraordinary people who have helped shape the diverse cultural landscape of Western Canada.”

In a field that elevates the jottings of mostly accomplished or famous people, *Naomi’s Houses* stands out for its lack of pretension and for the very ordinariness of the author’s memories, despite her family’s poverty: Grandma’s shell



Stitching together the layers of a life story.

collection, blueberry picking, jellied salads, mail-order catalogues, hand-me-down dresses, and on and on. Tennison tells her story in straightforward, unadorned prose, with diction that is sometimes as flat as the prairies where she came of age and sometimes equally unexciting. It is, nevertheless, a detailed first-person account of what hardscrabble farm and small-town life was like in the 1960s and '70s, and for that alone it’s surely worth preserving.

♦

ON THE POPULAR *BREVITY BLOG* — “ESSAYS EXPLORING craft and the writing life” — Allison K. Williams, an author, editor, and writing coach, and Jane Friedman, the author of *The Business of Being a Writer*, suggest one of the reasons

memoirs are becoming a harder sell. “At this particular moment in time,” Friedman points out, “where I see more writers than ever writing about trauma, especially from childhood, the story lines can unfortunately start to look the same.”

While *Naomi’s Houses* is not, strictly speaking, a trauma memoir, there’s no doubt Tennison experienced real hardship growing up, especially considering the affluence and conveniences most of us take for granted today. For much of her childhood, she lived without indoor plumbing, refrigeration, central heating, a telephone, or a functioning car. Still, Tennison’s reminiscences are bathed in the sepia tones of nostalgia that tend to colour our memories, whether we grew up poor or not. Above all, the book is a biography of and an apology to the author’s mother, Naomi, delineated through the inadequate houses she struggled to make into homes for her children. The first of these, which Tennison calls the farmhouse, is where she and her two older siblings, Edward and Lynette, were born.

Situated about 500 kilometres northwest of Winnipeg, near the village of Bowsman, the farmhouse was built by Tennison’s father. Because she was very young, her memories of her first home are fleeting: frost on the inside of the windows, the smell of bread baking in the wood stove. “Though it was the most basic of shelters and remained largely unfinished,” she writes, “the structure he built became a home filled with love.”

But life was hard, the winters cold, the soil grudging, the neighbours nosy. Water had to be hauled in ten-gallon milk cans from another farm a mile away; transportation was a team of horses or a 1930 Plymouth. A fourth child, a baby brother, died in infancy. But “Mum” carried on making do, mending and sewing, saving scraps of old clothing for quilts, “kneading bread, whipping cream, mixing and decorating cakes and cookies, and preparing vegetables and meat for canning.” She iced the birthday cakes to become sailboats and elephants and rabbits. Daddy was up at dawn to stoke the fires and to feed and milk the cows. Baths were taken in a galvanized tub, and pyjamas warmed by the wood stove. “Looking back, I marvel at how protected and loved we were,” Tennison writes.

Then, when she was six, her beloved father died suddenly — of an ulcer. “No one dies of an ulcer,” numerous doctors have told her since then. “But my father did,” she has always maintained. If things were bad up to this point, they became infinitely worse. Naomi, overcome with grief and fears for the future, allowed her overbearing father to oversee the sale of the farm and “bully” her into buying a house in Swan River. Tennison unapologetically refers to it as

Rock Dove

they would not be here if it wasn't for us

from cliff faces to skyscrapers
no longer able to differentiate what's real from within the illusion
of safety and assimilation

even now, a hundred years on, freedom is just as easy
to snuff out

with a shriek followed by knowable silence
a small head goes missing

hawk talons careens into the budding apple tree wings and twigs

blood-tipped beak-hooked red feathers red eyes

mouth open mouth close ripping tufts of white onto the lawn

downy death clouds dot the scene
as witnesses look down from their double-paned nests

we believe we are seeing when we look
eyes look and look talons and beaks tear
slowly gradually one mouthful at a time

bodies made for flight are pulled from their bones
as the wind carries feathers into the neighbour's yard

Shannon Lintott

Shannon Lintott is currently working on their debut chapbook.

the Hovel. The tiny two-bedroom house built in the 1930s was a wreck, lacking an adequate kitchen. The family had electricity now, but the wiring was dangerously faulty, with few outlets. Tennison slept with her mother in one bedroom, her brother in the other, and her sister on the living-room couch. Tennison finally got her own room after Edward and Lynette moved away. Although Naomi had "secretarial skills," she was unable to find an office job: "For someone so shy, I imagine Mum 'didn't interview well,' as we would say today." Naomi and her young daughter subsisted on government welfare and the meagre earnings gleaned from decorating cakes and cleaning the Anglican church. Shame and resentment, the evil twins of poverty, did not spare Tennison. Why, she

wondered, did not one help them out? She describes her mother as "demoralized" and "always aware of her inadequacies," but she tries to put a positive spin on this too: "Indirectly, she taught me self-sufficiency because I saw that no one else was stepping up to assist us and soon developed a 'no fear' attitude when it came to banging together a shelf or mastering complex sewing or knitting patterns."

Over the years, brief respite from the grind of doing without was provided by a third house. Wildwood, which belonged to Naomi's parents, "stood elegantly on a slight rise surrounded by a manicured lawn." It was an oasis of plenty throughout the author's childhood. She compares her memories of visits there to memories of Rosebud in *Citizen Kane*: "The

word Wildwood has me thinking of laughter and happy times." Tennison recalls picking berries and seeing relatives smoking fish, making jam, and quilting — and, of course, she remembers television. When visiting Wildwood, she was able to watch *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *Hazel*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and, when she was five, the funeral of John F. Kennedy. These sojourns were nevertheless overshadowed by the knowledge that a return to the cold and cramped miseries of the Hovel was inevitable.

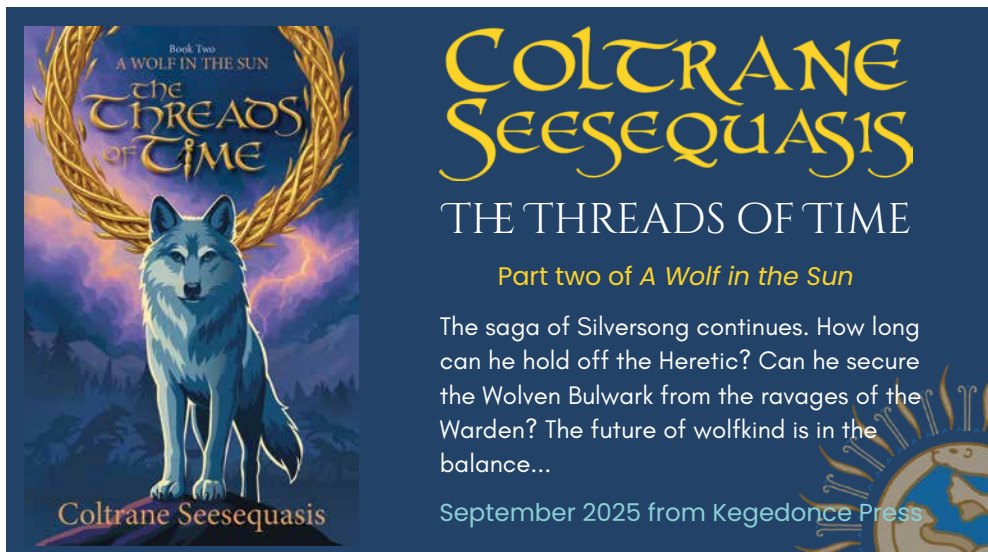
The fourth house figured only briefly in Tennison's life. "The Haunted Acres," she writes, "is a mere blip in my memory of the houses I inhabited." Now seventeen, she had begun to resent the limitations of poverty and her mother's passivity. But the biggest upheaval was Naomi's remarriage that summer, which must have been a severe blow to a teenager who was used to having her mother all to herself. The Haunted Acres was a palace compared with their earlier homes. It had every modern convenience, and the marriage got Naomi off welfare. But her unnamed new husband turned out to be controlling and abusive, and the marital home turned into a prison for Naomi. Tennison soon escaped, moving to Ontario to attend university. Fortunately, Naomi had refused to sell the Hovel, and it was there she fled to when her marriage disintegrated completely.

It was a brief hiatus, however: her father soon insisted that Naomi move to Wildwood to care for her mother, who had dementia, and a brother with cancer. Tennison expresses anger that her "kind, sweet mother could be so ill-used throughout her life," while also admiring her "sturdy commitment to never complain." When her mother and brother died, Naomi returned once more to the Hovel, "the house she always hated." An old-age pension, when she turned sixty-five, provided more money than she'd ever had, and for a short period it enabled her to travel to the East Coast and the southern U.S. After dementia came for her and her children moved her to a comfortable apartment in a seniors' residence, Naomi "walked back to that house almost every day to sit in the cold and dark."

It is, frankly, a sad ending to a sad life, and Tennison's regret at not being there to help her mother in her final difficult years feels like the impetus behind this memoir: "I no longer lived in Swan River and was shamefully oblivious to Mum's plight through the five or so years while her marriage unravelled and her older brother and mother declined."

Tennison had the decency to wait until her mother was dead before she publicly unpacked the trials and the humiliations that come with being poor. When we lose someone, it is only human to wish we'd expressed our love and regret while they were still alive. Naomi will never read her daughter's tribute, though I wonder what she would think if she could. Would someone so shy and stoic object to having her sometimes humiliating circumstances laid bare for anyone to see? Would she bridle at the portrait her daughter has painted of a passive, timid woman beset by an uncaring world?

Memoir writers are ethically bound to be as exact and as true to others' experience as they are to their own. But how is this even possible? Given Naomi's natural reticence, we will never fully know what she thought or felt, and that, perhaps, is the saddest part of the story. ▲



Tall Tale

A determined writer looks back

David Staines

Big Girls Don't Cry: A Memoir About Taking Up Space

Susan Swan

HarperCollins

272 pages, softcover, ebook and audiobook

LIFE WRITING IS A COMPELLING AND curious literary form. Under the veneer of honesty, autobiographers often depart from the rigours of candid self-revelation to adjust their lives to their own desired framework, introducing unverified reports or leaving out questionable material.

Canada has a long history of political autobiographies. Judy LaMarsh's *Memoirs of a Bird in a Gilded Cage*, from 1969, and Brian Mulroney's *Memoirs*, from 2007, are among those that reveal the politico's penchant for narrative disclosure and selective expurgation. By comparison, our country has seen few literary autobiographies. Northrop Frye and Marshall McLuhan certainly did not relish the mode. Deeply suspicious of it, Frye demurred when approached by his eventual biographer, John Ayre, for "he was uncertain about his suitability for a full-length book." As Ayre recalled, Frye had "already warned off biographers by claiming that he had led an uneventful life." McLuhan too abhorred the intrusion of the personal in his writings.

The literary landscape is changing, however. The novelist Miriam Toews has just published *A Truce That Is Not Peace*, for example, and Margaret Atwood will soon unveil *Book of Lives: A Memoir of Sorts*. Susan Swan is yet another among our literary voices who has decided to engage in the form with *Big Girls Don't Cry: A Memoir About Taking Up Space*. Unlike many political figures, Swan leaves nothing hidden.

For Swan, an autobiography was initially an attempt to understand her size. The daughter of a family doctor who stood six foot five and a mother of five foot ten, she reached her full height of six feet, two inches by the age of twelve—at a time when the average Canadian woman was closer to five three. Ultimately, her account of her early growth and distinguishing stature has become a self-portrait of her gradual acceptance among unapologetic feminists.

Born in 1945 and raised in the Presbyterian world of small-town Midland, Ontario, Swan roamed through her comfortable brick house and tried to adapt to the dreams other people had for her. Among them was her busy father, who had no time for his family and was the only person who never had a crisis, "consumed by his self-image as a strong, giant-like healer." And there was Susan's overbearing mother, who always wanted the best for her daughter,



Susan Swan in November 1999, while promoting her third novel, *The Last of the Golden Girls*.

provided the two agreed about what was best. "In a moment of confidence," Swan recalls, "she once told me in all seriousness that the world would be better off without religion, sex, and the male sex." Swan struggled with the prototypes of womanhood fostered by such figures as well as by her headmistress at Havergal College, in Toronto, where she was "encouraged to walk around the court" before basketball games "to intimidate the other team." But she intended to live humbly in order to rebel against what she considered her privileged background.

Swan was also determined to be a writer, though such determination did not lead to early success. Married young to a conservative businessman who did not appreciate her ambitions, she had escaped the rigid confines of her family only to walk into another set of conventions as debilitating as those of her childhood home. "I had to find a solution," she writes. Leaving her failed marriage, she chose to be a single mother, and, for the first time in her life, she began to explore a more liberal world.

Instead of resuming her earlier career as a journalist, she became a performance artist, but the work left her less than satisfied. Feeling unmoored, she did not yet "understand that writing fiction required long uninterrupted blocks of time that let you daydream your way into a novel or short story." As she learned the craft, she also recognized that "my size is a bonus, not a drawback. It's part of who I am, and the mythic spell cast by height, plus the power of words, sets me apart as a writer."

The lesson? "Make use of everything that's yours, in other words, because it's unique to you."

While preparing her first book, *The Biggest Modern Woman in the World*, published in 1983, Swan began to understand her own relative importance. No longer the character in other people's visions, she came to know herself as a unique and complex human being: "It only took me to my mid-forties to discover that it's easier to be my own norm." Before that, Swan suffered from hopelessly idealizing romantic partners. She tried to act and think as she imagined a typical man would want her to act and think. Even now, she is convinced, women live with norms that straight men have fashioned—in "a world where femininity is an adjunct to a hyper-masculine definition of masculinity."

Swan believes the female desire to please others is deeply rooted. Only by venturing inwards can a woman acknowledge her core tenets. Many of the men Swan met in life saw women's bodies as a version of their own and appeared uninterested in knowing the difference. She wants women to understand their own personal power. "I know the answer. I've always known," Swan came to realize by the 1990s. "I'm too independent now to limit myself to being a man's helpmate."

From Midland to Toronto, from New York City to the fabled contours of Corfu and Crete, *Big Girls Don't Cry* examines one Canadian novelist's fixation on her size, which blossoms into a detailed understanding of her personal growth as a resilient feminist. ▲

Once upon a Time in New York

The world as Lorne Michaels and Graydon Carter made it

Chris Jones

Lorne: The Man Who Invented Saturday Night Live

Susan Morrison

Random House

656 pages, hardcover, ebook, and audiobook

When the Going Was Good: An Editor's Adventures During the Last Golden Age of Magazines

Graydon Carter, with James Fox

Penguin Press

432 pages, hardcover, ebook, and audiobook

LORNE MICHAELS LIKES TO SAY, "THE history of New York is written by out-of-towners." Susan Morrison, in her affectionate biography, *Lorne: The Man Who Invented Saturday Night Live*, writes that Toronto-born Michaels credits the line to Harold Ross. The founding editor of *The New Yorker* was, in fact, from Colorado. Morrison, who today is the articles editor at Ross's now ancient magazine, has found no record that he said it, but both the maxim and the attribution *feel* true. Several seminal New York institutions were created by people drawn to the city's lights rather than born under them, and it makes sense that one of their number might point out their collective contributions. If you're going to take up space in Manhattan especially, the way Michaels has at Rockefeller Center for more than fifty years, you need to continue to earn it.

Graydon Carter, another Canadian émigré and the swoopy-haired editor of *Vanity Fair* from 1992 to 2017, makes his own case for permanent New York residency in *When the Going Was Good: An Editor's Adventures During the Last Golden Age of Magazines*. The relative slightness of his memoir suggests that he has less to say about himself than Morrison does about Michaels, and for modern readers the page math seems about right.

There's an urgency in *Lorne* that's absent from Carter's selective survey of his life. After Morrison delivers her central character's requisite backstory — Lorne Lipowitz lost his father at fourteen and found one of several surrogates in Frank Shuster, his girlfriend's dad and half of the comic duo Wayne and Shuster — her book gets an almost electric charge when *Saturday Night Live* enters the frame, as if picking up the show's energy by osmosis. The spine of her narrative is a single episode from 2018, hosted by Jonah Hill, and her minute-by-minute accounting of the performance and the chaos behind the scenes is anxiety-inducing stuff. *Lorne* could have been written in the present tense. Starting with its title and continuing with

every word after, *When the Going Was Good* is a lament for a lost past.

I was a writer at *Esquire* while Carter ran *Vanity Fair*, a small-town Canadian boy who never earned more than a visitor's pass to New York. I still heard the possibly apocryphal lore of our rival's gilded existence, passed along during boozy, envy-filled nights at Keens or Elaine's: that Carter assigned four stories for every one he published, with the budget and ruthlessness required to kill the other three; that the famed photographer Annie Leibovitz made more in an hour than any of us made in a month. (Bryan Burrough, the author of *Barbarians at the Gate* and a *Vanity Fair* special correspondent under



Two icons confronting the sands of time.

Carter, recently confirmed the rumours of largesse by revealing that he was paid \$498,141 for three stories a year, a borderline-offensive sum even by the standards of peak magazine.) *Vanity Fair* felt to us like the glossy equivalent of the vaguely aristocratic, gossipy intellectual who looks down on you for your hustle and coarser tastes. We soothed ourselves with the knowledge that we'd kick their asses if we ever met them in the magazine division of the Central Park softball league. I did, anyway.

Carter's book is like Carter's magazine, which always seemed to me to deliver less than it promised, with a bloated masthead of hall of fame writers who didn't write very much. (Even here, Carter employs a co-writer, James Fox.)

I also know people who adored his *Vanity Fair*, and I've talked to former colleagues who loved *When the Going Was Good* and thought it was an enjoyable, dishy romp, a time-machine trip to a better world. Maybe it's my holdover jealousy at play, but I can't say I did. My favourite part was Carter's account of his summer as a lineman on the railway in Saskatchewan, which feels honest and true, like the work. His later magazine escapades read like a boast when they don't read like a eulogy; his book might contain more proper names than any other in history. (It does not have an index, but compiling one would have employed somebody for weeks.) Carter fancies himself as the outwardly self-effacing, inwardly self-satisfied guest you'd wish to sit beside at a dinner, and I'd wager he's charming in person. I found the extended version of him and his often meaningless celebrity encounters wearying, but again, that might say more about me than about him. He was an iconic editor, a giant of our weird little industry, and I can see how someone only slightly more removed from his former orbit would be dazzled by his charmed life. At the Beverly Hills Hotel, he asks a stranger to direct him to the pool, and the stranger is Fred Astaire; he reaches for his wineglass at a dinner and accidentally bumps Dolly Parton in the breast.

Morrison's book, in contrast, is the work of a different kind of obsessive and more illuminating for it. (She was one of the original editors at *Spy* magazine, Carter's beloved shuttered satirical; "the only one with a proper Rolodex," Carter remembers, and that checks out.) *Lorne* is deeply reported and cleverly structured, and it contains some gorgeous sentences. During an interlude when Michaels takes to gardening, Morrison writes, "It was satisfying to revel in the production values of ten thousand daffodils." She started her book in 2015, and I sometimes wondered what she left out of it in exchange for her years of access. Michaels suffers in its pages, but he's usually the innocent victim of sinister forces rather than the receiver of deserved consequences. Whenever critiques are directed his way, either by Morrison or by one of her interviewees — Michaels is sometimes too enamoured of himself and prone to coldness and credit seeking — they are love taps masquerading as torpedoes. (Conan O'Brien is an exception. "It took me a long time, as I grew up more and got therapy, to realize, he's a really scared person," he tells Morrison.) *Lorne* is otherwise a mostly glowing portrait of a genius, a philosopher king.

Given Michaels's record, the talent he's found, and the wisdom he's acquired, he is one of a type. He's about to turn eighty-one and still occupies the centre of everything that he's built,

an empire far more expansive than *Saturday Night Live* alone. He's also at least partially responsible for the *Late Night* series, *The Kids in the Hall*, *30 Rock*, and *The Tonight Show*, where he installed SNL alum Jimmy Fallon as host. "Do you know how many funny people there are in the world?" he often asks. "There are about nine. They know who they are." Michaels, presumably, can name the other eight.

Lorne is nearly as flush with cameos as Carter's book, and for better purpose, as it recollects the countless careers its subject has made: Chevy Chase, John Belushi, Gilda Radner, Dan Aykroyd, Jane Curtin, Tina Fey, Chris Farley, Mike Myers, Will Ferrell, Bill Hader, Seth Meyers... (*Lorne* has an index, and it is massive.) Over *Saturday Night Live*'s long history, its writers and cast have made running gags out of Michaels and his litany of famous-people anecdotes. Because he uses only first names when he spins them, he'll say "Paul," and everyone is left wondering whether he's talking about McCartney or Simon, both of whom he claims as close friends, unless they've heard the tale before — and they probably have.

MEN LIKE CARTER AND MICHAELS ARE TROPHY hunters, really, and not only in their claiming of their slices of New York: he who dies with the most stories wins. My magazine friends and I were the same in our lesser capacities, as if we were collecting celebrity heads on the walls of our memory banks rather than deer antlers or mounted fish. Sometimes that meant we confused our proximity to fame with our own, inflating our essentialness to the scene. I spent a week at *Saturday Night Live* in 2017 — Michaels refused to talk to me, but I did take careful note of his edamame addiction — while I shadowed Alec Baldwin for a cover story for *The Atlantic*. I was in the early stages of a calamitous divorce, and Baldwin was generous, whispering "Better days" into my ear when we hugged on our final evening together. The kindness of my surprising new friend meant a great deal. A few years later, I appeared on his podcast to talk about a different story, and he had no idea who I was or any recollection that we'd met.

That was a necessary lesson in our importance and its relativity. I loved my tenure at *Esquire* and don't want to minimize the good journalism that my colleagues did, alongside the regrettable "Sexiest Woman Alive" fare of a different time. Some of our stories mattered, and I remain proud of them. But I also put in shifts at a dry cleaner and on a hog farm — every *Esquire* writer had also been a salesman, which fit — and I've come to understand that "magazine writer" was a ridiculous way to make a living. (Once, early in my career, I had a painter at my house to give me an estimate, and he asked me what I did for work. I told him, a little too proudly. "You'll have to pay in advance," he said.) Now, not even a decade removed from my blessed time as one, I think back and marvel at our good fortune, that it was possible to make upper-middle-class money by jetting off to Los Angeles to write a story about George Clooney that a few people might read on an airplane. The late *New York Times* journalist David Carr referred to the job as a "grand caper," and now I recognize that he was exactly right. We were all charlatans with varying success until 2016 or so. Carter, maybe the most successful of all, got an extra year on the lam. Then the world caught up to our mischief and replaced our shenanigans with a new model that

offered dopamine hits and fleeting viral fame in lieu of actual currency. You get what you pay for and all that.

In a way, Carter's and Morrison's books both come off like displays of riches that younger generations can never hope to have, because they aren't available to anyone anymore. *When the Going Was Good* is infused with melancholy, an accidental overdose of heartbreak. I think I would have preferred it had Carter treated everything more like the luxurious folly that it was. He is presently the co-editor of *Air Mail*, "a mobile-first digital weekly" that had escaped my attention until I read chapter 4. It has 500,000 subscribers, I've since learned, which has left me resurrecting my old softball fantasies, but Carter has also announced that it's for sale, because who wants to edit glorified emails all day? The man knows parties, and ours was decadent and fun. It is also over. Carter approached Michaels decades ago when he was raising funds for *Spy*. "He turned me down in the nicest possible way," Carter tells Fox, who tells us. "His rationale was that creative people don't invest — others invest in them." Once upon a time, they did.

After producing more than 900 episodes of *Saturday Night Live*, Michaels continues to work, pausing briefly to celebrate a milestone before resuming his forever search for the next "More Cowbell." *Saturday Night Live* has changed less than our media in general since its inception — Michaels insists on still using handwritten cue cards, for instance — but even he can't outrun the reality that network television is collapsing, and no one involved with the show can imagine its survival beyond his. (For people close to

Michaels, it must sometimes be hard to know which is keeping the other going.) Amy Poehler, another of his discoveries turned stars, calls it "the show your parents used to have sex to that you now watch from your computer in the middle of the day." Nostalgia has its easy appeal, and Morrison points out that most fans, when asked to name their favourite cast members, will name those who helped get them through high school. Michaels, unlike Carter, refuses to ache for the departed. "You can't just spend the last half of your life watching the first half of your life," he says. To him, looking back means that you're faced in the wrong direction.

Perhaps that's the secret behind his more sustained relevance. Michaels is expert in cultivating chaos in addition to his ten thousand daffodils. Comedy comes out of discomfort; it's a response to the sight of ruins. Network executives will look in on the writers, expecting to see them sweating over their sketches and jokes — *working*, in the traditional sense — and they're aghast to find a room full of people fooling around. "They don't realize that there's more invention in disorder," Michaels says. That's true of the world, too. Today's is different from the one that came before it, that gave way to it, and it's presenting different openings for different talents, telling different stories in different ways. People posting TikToks of mukbangs in their cars might seem like the makers of lesser art to those of us who liked our entertainments the way they were, but that's how movie people thought of TV people, and how theatre people thought of movie people. An audience's attention, like space in New York, is not a birthright. Sometimes it's just someone else's turn to occupy it. ▲

Literary Review of Canada

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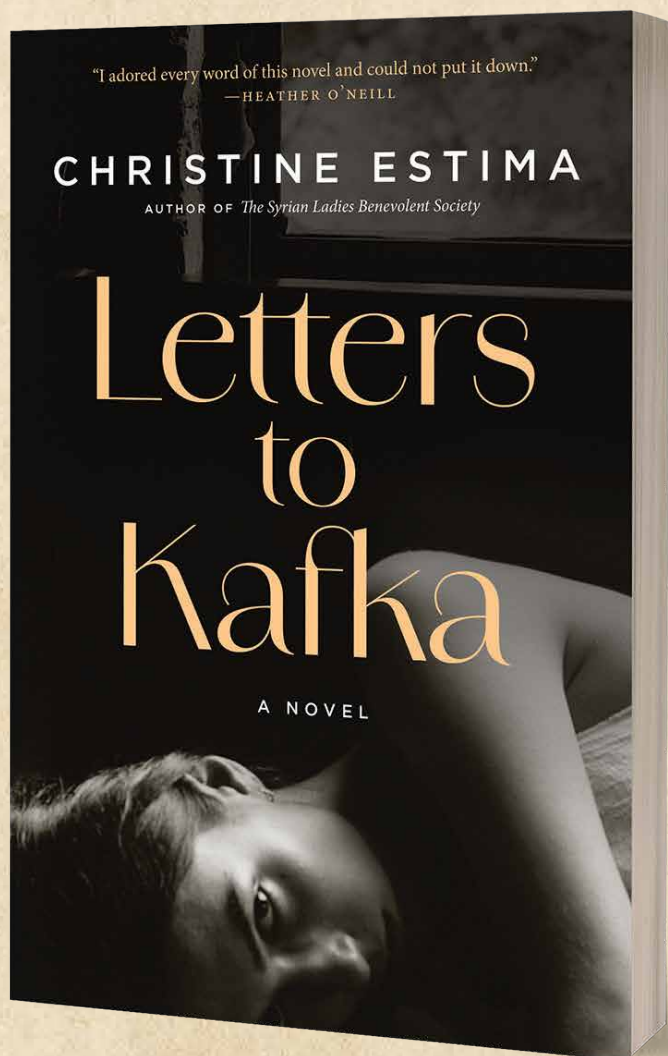
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An ethnographer and her subject

Andrew Torry

Randia's Quiet Theatre: Performing Care and Activism with a Romani Elder

Magdalena Kazubowski-Houston

McGill-Queen's University Press

282 pages, softcover and ebook

IN THE EARLY 2000S, MAGDALENA Kazubowski-Houston returned to her native Poland to conduct ethnographic research on Romani women. During the project, the York University anthropologist grew close to Randia, a fortune teller who, "over time, became a significant presence" in her life. "Randia and I came back to the moment we met many times," she writes. "It sparked a two-decade-long friendship."

Randia's Quiet Theatre is a record of their collaborative relationship, which blurred the line between ethnographer and participant. Kazubowski-Houston structures the book around her field notes, interviews, and transcriptions of their "dramatic storytelling sessions." What unites these forms is "intimate ethnography," a mode of research that "takes up emotional experiences as an anthropological subject." Such an approach demands extraordinary commitment. From 2010 to 2019, Kazubowski-Houston made frequent trips to Elbląg, the small northern city where she grew up. There she dined with Randia, accompanied her on errands, helped manage her medications, and assisted with chores. During the same visits, she tended to her own ailing mother. "I found caring for both her and Mama mentally and physically taxing," she admits. "But at the same time, I found myself relying on Randia's counsel."

As a member of the marginalized Romani community — an Indo-Aryan ethnic group — Randia faced a certain amount of discrimination. Up until her death in 2021, she lived in one of many "grey ghettos," rundown districts populated by low-income seniors. Her deteriorating building lacked an elevator — a serious barrier to mobility for someone in her seventies, in poor health, and living on the fourth floor. Yet Kazubowski-Houston consciously turns her attention away from large-scale, systemic inequality, focusing on the minutiae of Randia's everyday life.

While many Polish cities remain walkable, a growing car culture has increased sprawl and diminished public transit. Randia could not afford taxis or ride-sharing services and had no one to drive her around (by 2018, five of her ten children had passed away and the rest had emigrated). So she spent most of her time confined to her apartment. In one moving interview, Randia described counting the "minutes and seconds" of each hour. She said that she felt "the

time flowing through my hands." More than anything, she wanted to see her children again. "I want to hear their voices."

Dramatic storytelling became a way for Randia to process some of this pain and loneliness. "In Randia's quiet theatre," Kazubowski-Houston writes, "time was circular rather than chronological." Conducted in the privacy of her kitchen, these were improvised scenes in which both women slipped into different characters and explored scenarios that mirrored Randia's life. Performance-based experimentation enabled Randia to voice "the absent, silent, taboo, unconscious, and unacknowledged aspects" of her experiences. "All this



Her instructive one-woman show.

is true," she said, challenging the fictional nature of her stories, "because I've lived it, other people've lived it, my family's lived it. There's nothing made up here."

Kazubowski-Houston noticed the sessions seemed to lift Randia's mood and encouraged her to convey desires or memories she might otherwise suppress. Through performance, Randia explored alternative lives and tapped into "subliminal bodily sensations and moods." Frustrated by the financial strain of supporting her incarcerated son, for example, she created a scene in which one of her characters, Córka, stopped sending her own jailed child care packages. Later she imagined that Córka went to live near her adult daughter in England, where she

was less isolated. These freeing exercises allowed Randia to temporarily inhabit different pasts, presents, and futures. "If only one could choose to live a different life, just like that, wouldn't that be nice?" she wondered. "Don't like your life? Take someone else's."

Kazubowski-Houston argues that by showing Randia ways to "circumvent the contingencies and necessities of her own life," these immersive collaborations helped her come to terms with grief. But the ethnographer discovers the method's limits for making lasting change. Randia often criticized her for emigrating to Canada and leaving her family behind. After their storytelling sessions, Randia seemed more compassionate and forgiving, but that proved fleeting: when Kazubowski-Houston would return to Poland after an absence, Randia would again chastise her for living abroad. Kazubowski-Houston speculates that these experiments "facilitated a momentary affective attunement rather than long-term empathic understanding," conceding the shortcomings of theatre in an anthropological context.

Kazubowski-Houston provides an unsentimental, critical assessment of her use of performance. But at times she struggles to clearly explain her key concepts. Take "quiet ethics," which she defines as "not simply an escapist fantasy but rather a springboard for action that cracks open possibilities for different experiences, relationships, and imaginaries." Even for specialists, this language is vague. Occasionally she makes perplexing claims that contradict the emotional core of the book. Toward the end, she explores the limitations of mutual understanding between scholar and interlocutor. "Empathic knowing can be experienced as an infringement on privacy," she writes. "As yet another insidious form of colonialism." The assertion ends there. No clarification or further context is provided. Are we to conclude, then, that empathy is harmful? Such moments are admittedly rare, but when they occur, they undermine an otherwise careful and personal work.

Nonetheless, *Randia's Quiet Theatre* is a perceptive and expansive contribution to performance studies. Most of us will care for an elderly person at some point — and, with luck, grow old ourselves. Kazubowski-Houston models the fluid creativity with which we might approach concerns about infrastructure for seniors and other marginalized communities. She acknowledges that the activist potential of drama-based ethnography is nebulous: "Quiet theatre may be a way of *being, doing, and intervening* that cannot be fully knowable." Still, she reminds us that, at the very least, we must nourish relationships with the vulnerable among us and be prepared to step into their worlds when they need care. ▲

Totally Deconstructed

Oh, that'd be reason enough for me

Tara Henley

Ugh! As If! Clueless

Veronica Litt

ECW Press

200 pages, softcover and ebook

ONE OF THE CHIEF TENSIONS OF contemporary CanLit is the ongoing tug-of-war between the instincts of the typical writer — oddball by temperament, outsider by circumstance — and the conformity that's crept over the culture. In recent years, our literary community has been flooded with a specific brand of radical politics that has become effectively *de rigueur*. But, of course, that which is dictated by the fashions of the day is not radical at all. So there's a paradox at the heart of our national scene that raises thorny questions: Can you be an iconoclast when the cherished beliefs that you're attacking are the same ones that everyone else is attacking — that everyone is expected, even required to attack? Is a policed status quo any better if it purports to be radical? Perhaps most pressing, how does an emerging talent find their voice — and stand out — in a climate that actively discourages doing so?

Ugh! As If! sees this clash between originality and orthodoxy play out on the page. The premise for Veronica Litt's debut is intriguing, centring on the 1995 teen comedy *Clueless*, itself an adaptation of the 1815 Jane Austen novel of manners, *Emma*. In her book-length exploration of the thirty-year-old film — directed by Amy Heckerling and starring Alicia Silverstone as Cher Horowitz and Paul Rudd as Josh Lucas — Litt mounts a spirited defence of what she refers to as "girly art," or frothy pop cultural products that explore women's stories in pleasurable ways. In her telling, the cult classic is anti-elitist and unapologetically so. It is open-hearted and generous. It resists succumbing to despair over the state of the world and rejects dystopian narratives. It believes in change, individually and collectively, and offers both a welcome reprieve from cynicism and an antidote to it. "When I watch *Clueless*, I get to inhabit Cher's light, bright perspective for 90 trouble-free minutes," Litt writes. "I enter an escape hatch from my actual problems: precarious employment, clinical depression, the fear of being evicted in a brutal housing crisis — all bog-standard millennial stressors."

Litt, an assistant professor at Cape Breton University, argues that "without feeling preachy or phony, *Clueless* doubles as both a comfort watch and a crash course for viewers hoping to improve themselves and their world." It's possible, she maintains, "to recognize problems and think constructively about amending them



It's, like, a famous movie.

without plummeting into complete doom-and-gloom pessimism." And so, ultimately, the sleeper hit's main strength is that it is invested in hope, the possibility of transformation, and community: "In a million subtle ways, *Clueless* argues that we need each other, that things get better when people unite."

Litt's take is refreshing and, it must be said, countercultural. In our hyperpessimistic era, hanging on to one's faith in humanity is not an insignificant rebellion. Yet she is clearly conflicted. Litt may champion anti-elitist art, but, oddly, she recruits highbrow theories on race, gender, and sexuality to do so. The reader, then, is left with the baffling experience of seeing ideas from the likes of Columbia University's Jack Halberstam grafted onto a mainstream mall movie from decades past, resulting in near-incomprehensible statements such as this: "According to the queer theorist Jack Halberstam, juvenile 'unknowing' can, funnily enough, lead to a higher-than-average willingness to listen, learn, and reinvent." Escapism is acknowledged but with a self-conscious ambivalence: "I'm gesturing towards Audre Lorde's original meaning of self-care as keeping yourself intact so that you have the energy to challenge systems of oppression." Elsewhere, we see a silver-screen kiss read through the lens of fourth-wave feminist consent discourse: "Gentleness is itself desirable. Also, we are all on Team Consent, yes? Paul Rudd proves that checking in is (and has always been) both good and hot." Silverstone comes under fire for endorsing Robert F. Kennedy Jr. for

president in 2024. Litt even argues that Ta-Nehisi Coates — a writer who could never be mistaken as optimistic on race — was overly generous in his assessment of the film's portrayal of race relations, which, in her view, perpetuates a harmful ethos of colour-blindness. All told, "the movie's proposal for an improved society contains some deeply regressive ideas."

It's hard to know who the target audience for such a critique is, but one suspects it's not the average reader. If we are going to be truly anti-elitist, that's probably who we should consider.

Although it has much to recommend it, *Ugh! As If!* basically converts a '90s chick flick into a vehicle for political posturing: "Ditzes use cluelessness to fight the power." In doing so, it veers away from something sparkling and fresh and becomes the sort of online polemic that one could read anywhere. A voice in the wilderness becomes a voice on Bluesky.

Litt is clearly someone who reads widely, thinks deeply, and writes well. She has a long career ahead of her, and it's likely her impulses toward independent thought will win out. But this new author, and CanLit as a whole, might want to spend a little less time thinking about what's popular with close peers and a little more time thinking about general audiences. Whatever one makes of the politics that currently dominates modern literature, conformity to any ideology can become tedious and can risk alienating the public, particularly those who are not steeped in the mores of activism and academia. Which, it turns out, is most of us. ▲

Museum Piece

You know nothing of Harley Parker's work

Maria Cichosz

Harley Parker: The McLuhan of the Museum

Gary Genosko

University of Alberta Press

268 pages, softcover and ebook

The Culture Box: Museums as Media

Harley Parker, edited by Gary Genosko

University of Alberta Press

280 pages, softcover and ebook

IN JANUARY 1967, YOUSUF KARSH PHOTOGRAPHED Marshall McLuhan inside the Royal Ontario Museum's recently opened hall of invertebrate fossils. In the portrait, McLuhan sits before a bank of telephones mounted on a dimly lit wall resembling a seabed, rakishly holding the camera's gaze, his smile teasing some tantalizing secret. The innovative exhibition offered visitors touch-friendly facsimiles, sand underfoot, recorded sounds, and the smell of the ocean. It was acclaimed in the press as an example of how McLuhan's ideas about sensory engagement could shape the future of museums. He may have been the poster boy, but the architect behind the new paleontology wing was his lesser-known collaborator, Harley Parker.

That Parker, who led design and installation at the ROM for ten years, was never photographed in his own exhibition is an injustice reflective of how he was viewed in relation to McLuhan (the *New York Times* called him a "disciple"). Parker was a man of many talents: beyond working as a researcher at the Centre for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto from 1967 to 1975, he was also a theorist, typographer, and painter. Yet he's best known as McLuhan's "right-hand man" or, less generously, as the "traveling crony" who acted as his stand-in at events once *Understanding Media*, published in 1964, became wildly popular. Parker seemed content to play the part, regardless of criticism. "I front for Marshall," he explained in a Toronto newspaper profile. "I have my own dignity, and doing things for Marshall doesn't affect it." Although McLuhan bragged that "we are so entirely conversant with each other that we can give a joint lecture as if by one man," he also quipped that "every man needs a dog."

Gary Genosko, a professor at Ontario Tech University, in Oshawa, traces how Parker interpreted McLuhan's ideas for exhibition design, highlighting his creation of an "explorimental" gallery at the Museum of the City of New York. Genosko had his work cut out for him: to dig Parker out from under McLuhan is no small task. It's difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins — and to what extent they were developing their own concepts. But through

close readings of Parker's writings and curatorial projects, Genosko offers a thorough account of his subject's core theories and "basic principles."

Parker's dream of mounting a display without a storyline has perhaps influenced the author's structure. Narrative was anathema to Parker, who associated it with straightforward and rational modes of presentation that he viewed as outdated in the '60s — useless when it came to commenting on the era's new technology. While this non-linear approach may work well in an exhibition, Genosko's shifting focus makes it hard to see the man behind the projects.

Nonetheless, there are enticing biographical snippets: an allusion to Parker's struggle with



How do you curate a two-way conversation?

alcohol, his wife's devotion to a local ashram, and his rebellious children, particularly his eldest son, Blake, who created multimedia "synthelidic" performances with the electronic music group Intersystems. Unfortunately, such details are few and far between. The book contains only a few images, making it easy to forget that Parker considered himself to be, first and foremost, a visual artist. It does, however, feature a lengthy discussion of his self-portraits that centres on his depictions of facial hair — puzzlingly described as "bearded media." Although Genosko excavates some of Parker's unique contributions to cultural studies, his version of the visionary remains "the McLuhan of the Museum" — an epithet adopted for the book's subtitle.

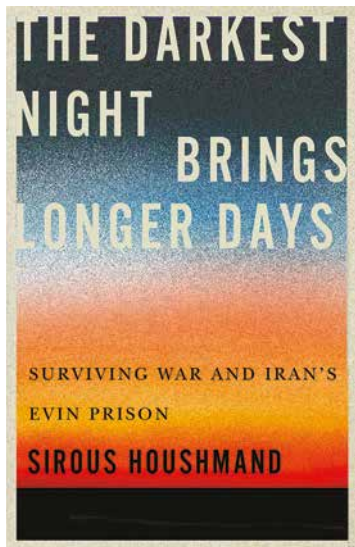
If Parker's individuality gets lost in Genosko's account of his life, it shines brightly in his own monograph, *The Culture Box*, in which his contrarian voice, love of wordplay, and passion for audience participation convey an idea of the museum as a medium of communication that is as fresh today as it would have been in 1973, had it been published then. In 2022, his daughter found the pages in an old briefcase. Why the manuscript went unpublished for so long remains unclear, though Genosko — who edited the text — suggests it may have taken a back seat to Parker's work for McLuhan.

In his articulate but "angry book," Parker condemns museums for being dead, joyless, and elitist spaces shaped by "filing-cabinet minds." These institutions have a grammar and a syntax, he suggests, and we've been using both all wrong. Rather than sharing content in a one-way, top-down stream from a specialist curator to a lay audience, these institutions should be laboratories for heightening perception. Parker thought galleries could radicalize education by confronting visitors with sensations from other times and cultures, harnessing the past to revolutionize one's relationship to the present.

The Culture Box is light on direct references to McLuhan, whose concepts are adapted in a way that speaks to Parker's back-pocket familiarity. He sharpens McLuhan's brand of media theory, which lacks any explicit form of social critique. He rejects the use of artifacts to affirm Western superiority and urges a move away from "plunder." Cultural dialogue, Parker suggests, is a "two-way street" that should unsettle our assumptions. He wants museums to become "meeting houses" where ordinary "citizens can encounter an interface of the university and the political economy of the community."

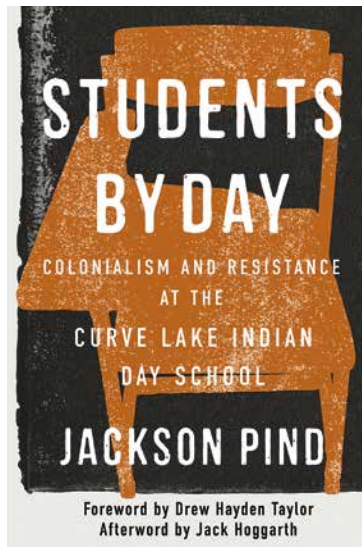
Genosko changed the subtitle from *Museums Are Today* to *Museums as Media*, arguing that Parker's historical moment is "very much yesterday." Yet there is something deeply contemporary about *The Culture Box*, which arrives in time for a curatorial landscape that has embraced the techniques Parker championed. He hoped exhibitions would offer drugless revelations and "mind-blowing experiences." While his ideal countercultural audience never engaged with his displays in the way he imagined, today's museumgoers are primed to revel in interactive experiences rather than view objects at a distance.

Next June, the ROM will open *Psychedelics*, a transdisciplinary exhibition that promises a "mind-bending, immersive AV installation" evoking "the sensory phenomena associated with 'tripping.'" This will be a hall of fossils for the twenty-first century, and I like to think that Harley Parker would have approved. ▲



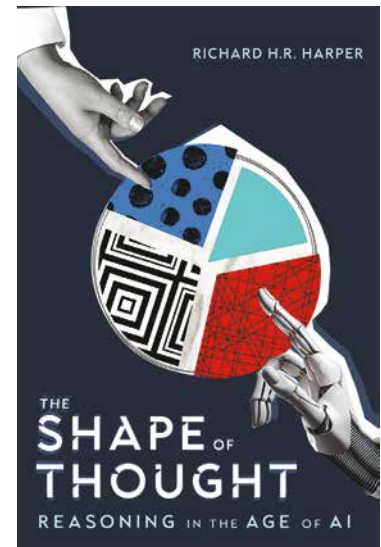
The Darkest Night Brings Longer Days
Surviving War and Iran's Evin Prison
Sirous Houshmand

"Sirous Houshmand has lived the fullest of lives as a witness to and participant in cataclysmic events. A refreshing and illuminating memoir."
–Arash Azizi, author of *What Iranians Want: Women, Life, Freedom*



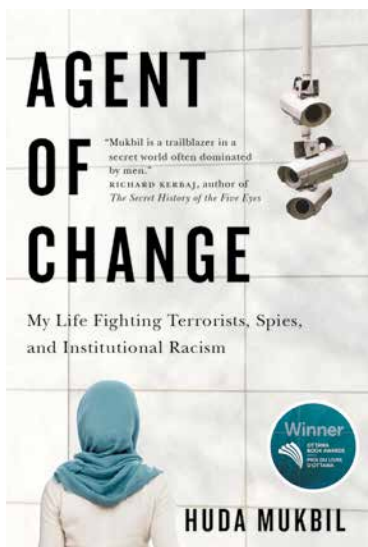
Students by Day
Colonialism and Resistance at the Curve Lake Indian Day School
Jackson Pind

"*Students by Day* sets a gold standard for community-centred research, reminding us of the centrality of love to culture, people, and politics."
–Niigaan Sinclair, author of *Winipék: Visions of Canada from an Indigenous Centre*



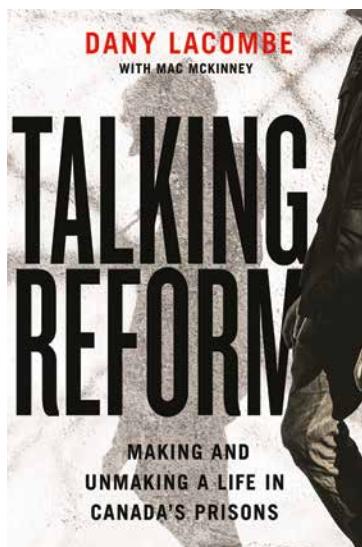
Shape of Thought
Reasoning in the Age of AI
Richard H.R. Harper

"Richard Harper is a wise and reassuring guide, placing recent anxieties over AI in the context of decades of technical change."
–Alan Blackwell, University of Cambridge



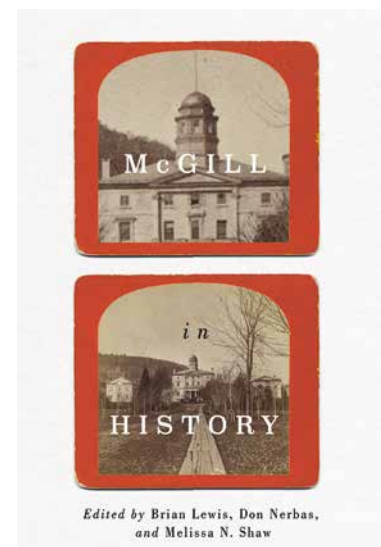
Agent of Change
My Life Fighting Terrorists, Spies, and Institutional Racism
Huda Mukbil

"Huda Mukbil is a trailblazer in a secret world often dominated by men. Her powerful story provides a never-before-seen picture of spy agencies. Utterly absorbing."
–Richard Keraj, author of *The Secret History of the Five Eyes*



Talking Reform
Making and Unmaking a Life in Canada's Prisons
Dany Lacombe, with Mac McKinney

"This is a daring, experimental, extraordinary project. Lacombe unflinchingly attends to the complexities and brutality of Mac's life. A must-read."
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McGill in History
Edited by Brian Lewis, Don Nerbas, and Melissa N. Shaw

"This is a history that responds to the expanded, decentralized nature of the twenty-first-century university, opening a new and many-paned window on McGill's past."
–Duncan L. McDowall, Queen's University



À la carte

According to a delicious art form

James Chatto

Tastes and Traditions: A Journey Through Menu History

Nathalie Cooke

Reaktion Books

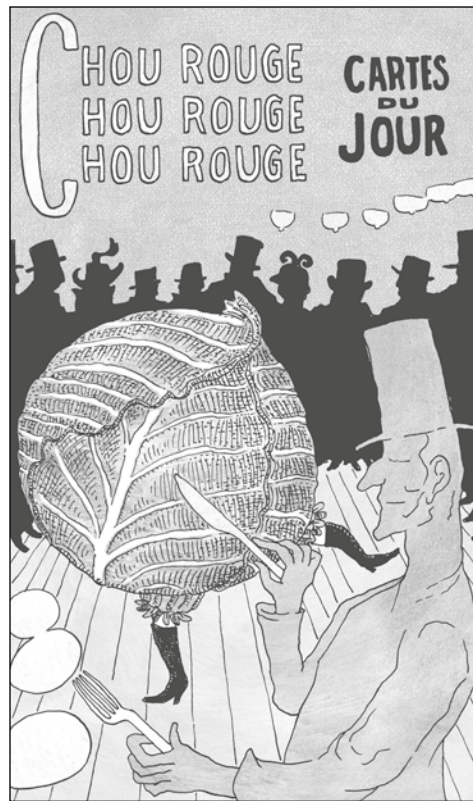
192 pages, hardcover and ebook

A MAN WALKS INTO A RESTAURANT and sits down expectantly, but instead of a charming server bearing a menu, there's a QR code glued to the table. With a sigh, he gets out his phone....This depressing dystopian scene has become an increasingly frequent reality since COVID-19, but however hygienic and handy QR codes may be, they will never inspire a book as thoughtful and rich as *Tastes and Traditions*, an investigation of the aesthetic and cultural semiotics of the printed menu.

Menus aren't always necessary. We can assemble an excellent breakfast from the buffet in a hotel dining room without a written guide, and we can choose the lunch we want from the passing carts in a dim sum restaurant. Half the fun of dining *omakase* in a high-end Japanese establishment is the mystery of what's coming next. But normally when we go out to eat, a menu makes a useful contribution to the occasion, not just by telling us what food is available and how much it costs but also by providing culinary context to the dishes we select—with bonus marks if the document is visually appealing, humorous, or otherwise interesting in its own right. And that is only the beginning. Once its primary job is done, an old menu becomes a historical artifact: the souvenir of a specific meal, perhaps, or a broader reflection of the tastes, prejudices, and requirements of the society of the day.

An English literature professor at McGill University, Nathalie Cooke is an expert at detecting nuances of meaning and historical resonance in the written word. Having set out her thesis that an old menu can tell “the belated reader” much more than simply what was once for dinner, she organizes her material according to half a dozen themes, each one explored through a generous number of examples. Cooke is a skillful curator, and her carefully chosen, clever juxtapositions prevent her book from being a mere list or catalogue. The first chapter, for instance, considers the design and visual appeal of menus, taking us from handwritten and painted mementoes of elaborate feasts hosted by Louis XV in the 1750s to a modern Bangkok restaurant's bill of fare composed entirely of emoji. En route, we encounter cards designed by Toulouse-Lautrec and Albert Robida, the gorgeous offerings of luxury ocean liners, and the mixed-media assemblages of the 1960s artist-chef Daniel Spoerri's “New Realism.”

With 190 illustrations, *Tastes and Traditions* allows us to see almost every menu Cooke discusses (though some of the fine print requires a magnifying glass). There is a strong temptation to flip through the pages as image after image catches the eye, because it is distractingly beautiful, amusing, or just plain weird. But Cooke's text is equally engaging. She discusses menus as intentional keepsakes and as manifestations of cultural exchange; she considers those for kids (and their parents) and examines changes in notions of dietary health. As Cooke points out, her own “twenty-first-century, Canadian perspective” often causes her to question details that would not have raised an eyebrow when a



Try our signature cabbage can-can!

menu was originally created: the casual racism inherent in cartoon stereotypes of Black and Indigenous cultures, Coca-Cola as a nutritious panacea, the offer of post-prandial cigarettes or cigars encouraging customers to smoke.

Cooke saves many of her most interesting discoveries for her final chapter, entitled “Riddle Me This: Menus That Intrigue.” Here we find eighteenth-century English “Enigmatic Bills of Fare” and nineteenth-century American “Conundrum Suppers,” both designed to entertain dinner guests by disguising the names of dishes as riddles to be solved. “The First Temptation in a Small Blast of Wind,” for example, was an apple puff. Such deliberate acts of obfuscation lead Cooke into a consideration

of the persistence of “menu French” on English and American *cartes du jour*, “inhibiting all but those diners familiar with ‘la langue de Molière’ from understanding and visualizing dishes clearly.” From there, she offers a lengthy analysis of Alchemist, the revered restaurant in Copenhagen created by the visionary chef Rasmus Munk. Dinner there consists of up to fifty courses and can last five or six hours, involving live music, video, and theatre. Munk's food is frequently camouflaged as something else or used as provocative metaphor. Ironically, while customers have access to a massive wine list, presented on a digital tablet, Alchemist has no menu. The restaurant's inclusion in this book, therefore, comes as a surprise and serves to underline another oddity: the conspicuous absence of chefs in *Tastes and Traditions*. Although understandable while Cooke is dealing with earlier centuries, when kitchens were staffed by anonymous artisans, it feels like an omission when she turns to modern times. Today's great chefs are rightfully considered artists, and the menus they create are their personal manifestos. Only Heston Blumenthal, the owner-chef of the Fat Duck, in England, is given his due, when Cooke zeroes in on the references to children's literature in his self-referential, retrospective “Anthology Menus.”

Then again, it's hard to criticize a book for sustaining a rigorously tight focus on its stated subject: not food or restaurants, chefs or restaurateurs, but menus themselves, those “invitations to flights of the imagination” and the discreet information that can be found in their words and images, if one knows where to look.

“This exploration was driven by four central questions,” Cooke writes in her conclusion. “What is a menu? What does it contain? What does it do? And why does it matter? I hope that if this book only begins to provide some answers to these questions, it will compel you to investigate the terrain of menus further.” That's a timely suggestion in the age of the smartphone, not just because of the proliferation of QR codes but also because those who might wish to keep a memento of a meal no longer need to beg or steal a menu from the restaurant: they just take photographs of the food. Future historians may find themselves faced with a problematic lack of source material, but, then again, menus have always been fragile items. In the words of the renowned American menu collector Henry Voigt, who contributes two examples to this book, “As with other types of ephemera, part of their appeal lies within the notion of their improbable survival.” Readers may find themselves more inclined to cherish the bill of fare next time they eat out—or at least to give it more than a cursory glance. ▲

Fiona's Wake

Fury came first, then the beauty

Suzanne Stewart

A mournful wind blew through the trees, and sounded in the chimney like the pedal notes of an organ.

—Thomas Hardy

AT HALF PAST TWO IN THE MORNING, on the twenty-fourth day of September 2022, as I watched from my living room windows, blurred by the rain, branches and trunks were twisted and tossed, thrashing one another, the wood crackling—clacking—and splintering, as summer's lush greenery caught too much of the wind.

For days, we had been warned of the hurricane, exceeding all others in its force, the forecast had said, but this one was delicately named: Fiona. What could she do? What harm would she bring?

From the Gaelic *fionn*, meaning white, fair, or beautiful, the name Fiona might also be rooted in the Gaelic *fine*, designating a vine, as does the Latin *vinea*, which also resembles, rhythmically, Fiona. Vines flourish, twist, and intertwine with beauty, sometimes producing white flowers and fruit among their lustrous leaves.

Trees are meant to bend in the wind, swaying with supple grace, fluid in their motions, as if orchestrating a harmony among their separate selves: the leaves brushing, emitting a watery wavelike sound, resembling rain. Perhaps Fiona would enrich and enhance that leafy sensation.

But that wasn't the case.

Throughout the long night, in between the weather reports, the radio offered a program of music, intervals of tranquility, but that fair and lovely sound had stopped altogether at a quarter past twelve, when the power failed. Apart from the wind, silence set in. When the storm passed directly above us two hours later, its winds at 165 kilometres per hour, the water was surging.

At daylight, I witnessed the fallen trees, flat on the ground or caught on the way down, lashed and toppled or split, or severed in places, the roots upturned, leaving massive holes in the earth, brown mud puddles, where raindrops were dripping from circular cakes of soil into the pools below. The ground had clung to the roots, even as they were withdrawn: with suddenness, or was the removal slow? Encased by mud, these threads of life were tangled and wet, firm and robust, though not strong enough to hold up the trees, the disc that came up with the roots seeming so thin.

◆

SEPTEMBER 26. SHOULD WE GO OR NOT?

It was three o'clock. Rain was still falling, streaking the sky; the greyness across the hills



Somehow the wreckage had started to chime.

was heavy and thick. All afternoon, the showers were pausing, then starting again.

"But the air is warm," my friend said. "I think you should come." We'd take a shorter route than usual to the pond, he assured me.

He wanted me to see its colour.

"Orange," he called it, a strange and unusual radiance, from sediment in the water, stirred by the storm. He had saved that detail—"the best"—for last, at the end of his long account of his solo hike in the woods on Sunday, one day after the hurricane had come and gone, the damage still fresh.

"The trees were smashed," he said.

I didn't like the word "smashed," which was harsh and inaccurate, I felt: fallen, perhaps, or snapped or uprooted or leaning, but not smashed, exactly.

"I think you should come," he said again, his jacket and pants and runners and hair already drenched from the short walk to my office. "You'll get wet."

Yes, I would join him, follow him into the forest, where I couldn't safely go on my own, to see the extent of the frightening infliction: the outcome of a unique and disastrous event. So I rushed home and changed. Then we set off, at half past three. I had dressed in layers to prevent a chill when wet, but I walked under my umbrella with bare hands. What would be the point of gloves that are soaked?

The route wasn't short, even though he had said, when enticing me to come, "It won't take long. We can't get through to parts of the trail."

At the fork, where we might have turned left for the other loop, he led us to the right, to the east side of the forest. Although I didn't know why, I suspected something dramatic—or tragic—where wind and rain had left the woods in a wreck.

"Just up here," he kept saying, as if he intended to turn back at that unidentified point, so we walked and walked in our usual direction, as I felt my tension and frustration rise, with delays and meanderings off the path, to avoid the puddles and pooling water or to search for the trail itself, lost entirely in places.

Finally we stopped, unable to proceed.

My treasured little ravine, on the easternmost edge of the circular trail, was inaccessible—unrecognizable. Trees were tangled in a colossal upheaval. The lovely rolling hillside, revealing the contours of the land, with a deep but gentle valley at its base, had disappeared; it was blocked from our sight. We didn't know where or how to look.

And how to get through?

"We might as well keep going in this direction," he said, as if he had planned, all along, to attempt the more daring, arduous option.

"But we'll just have more of these obstacles," I replied, urging him to go back.

In silence, he carried on, climbing on top of the fallen trunks, slippery and mossy and wet, or snapping the branches that hindered our way, as our feet slid in the mud. Often we stopped in quiet wonder, in awe of the scale: trees so extensive that we couldn't see the beginning

or the end of the long logs, horizontal at our sides. We stood face to face with the roots, now vertical, embedded in soil that had stuck to the matting when the trees had tumbled. Feeling our human smallness, we couldn't interpret the chaos: complexity and confusion.

"Bones," he called them, "the bones of trees." Not flesh but bones.

Splintered and moist, the trunks were rotting already, surprisingly soft in our fingers, delightfully sweet when we held the dampened fragments to our noses.

"Trees die gracefully," I dared to say. Human mortality is hidden, the flesh set underground and out of sight, but trees meet death before our eyes, and as detected by other senses. "With beauty," I said.

He wasn't convinced of "beauty," so I mentioned the aspect of suffering. Trees must feel, endure the snap. The fall, the leaning, the collision, the breaking. Only a few were caught in neighbouring arms, supported by other trees, their roots not wholly ripped or exposed, though partially severed from the soil.

"These trees might live," I said, with hope.

"They might," he replied, hesitantly.

Some of the trees had fallen together, side by side, embracing each other, including the silver-spotted birch on the west end, where the trail ascends to the ridge: three trunks, tumbling in parallel, in death.

"A tree graveyard," he called it.

At every step, we witnessed the wreckage — the strangeness — with no way forward sometimes, while more and more holes appeared in the canopy overhead, altering a setting that we had known so well.

Although I resisted and struggled against his determination to forge ahead, all the way, to complete the entire loop — "This isn't what you promised when you said a short, partial hike in the other direction" — I was also aware, by the end, of the rarity: an exceptional encounter that no other hikers had likely experienced. We were entirely alone in a forest — a castle of crumbling trees — that had been ruined and reconfigured for our eyes alone.

In contrast to my cautious acceptance of his audacious sense of adventure late in the afternoon, when I would tire quickly, he became a Viking — a woodsman, a warrior — determined to break the branches, to move what he could, to get us through.

With multiple interruptions.

Not only to manoeuvre, but also to look.

And to listen, mostly to blue jays, and to running streams, and to a newly gentle breeze.

And to talk. Quietly. From time to time. At irregular intervals. Our thoughts and our words not chiming. Not yet.

◆

OCTOBER 1. FIVE DAYS LATER, WE LEFT IN A FLASH, a quick agreement, not needing deliberation this time, setting out at half past two, without an umbrella or gloves or additional layers of clothing. The afternoon was warm, dry, and sunny.

"We'll take the shorter route," he suggested, meaning to the west, all the way to the pond and back.

Determined to meet his friends at the pub, he didn't have time, he said, for a longer hike, so he didn't deviate from his intent as he had before. Neither of us had returned to the woods yet. What would we find, and what would we feel?

Door with a Crack in It

Before I can let a man love me, I need to know who he's cared for. Which of his parents had a doctor's appointment, which one of them will call confused.

And when I see a glimmer in someone's eye, that they too know this particular isolated monotony, I stick my foot in the crack of this particular conversational door, even as they try to close it.

And one night at dinner, I had forgotten the difference between 31 and 36 and parents who had you in their 20s and parents who didn't and I am 1,000 miles over a mountain that everyone knows they're walking towards but hopes they'll never reach

and all I want to do is say "I have to figure out how to get my father's beard trimmed" without someone looking at me like the world is on my shoulders. I would like the world to be invisibly on my shoulders,

and this is the circle of life, but mine was smaller and it spun more quickly. Or my parents' was, or something.

And maybe we shouldn't have sung "The Circle Game" so much growing up because it caused the painted horses to speed up

and maybe my mother shouldn't have read *Love You Forever* so much growing up though I wish I had been old enough to hold her in my arms when she needed it.

And now I am old enough to hold everyone in my arms and I've been lifting weights so I'm strong enough now and sometimes holding your people

in your arms looks like stillness in a dimly lit room and singing them to sleep and sometimes it looks like answering the phone when you're on your way out of the house

and you'd rather just listen to music, and sometimes it looks like making sure your father gets a haircut and sometimes it looks like not bringing the conversation to a screeching halt over dinner and sometimes it looks like propping your foot in the door of the carousel of time.

Emma Sheppard

Emma Sheppard is a professor of English in Toronto.

"The storm is gone," he said.

"We've made the break," I replied, suddenly regretting the loss, grateful for the earlier experience, before Fiona had fully withdrawn: when rain was steady, the air moist and warm, the mud slippery and soft, the clouds heavy and grey, the roots of the upturned trees dripping with water, the green leaves on the fallen trunks

shiny and wet, the wood inside the bark tinted with amber, some of it smelling sweet.

Now the freshness of the tempest, including its moody, atmospheric weather, had disappeared, for a bright — too bright — sunny sky, which I didn't like, with leaves, dry and brittle, under our feet.

"More like fall," he said.



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Yes, not lush and summery and solidly green, in the way that the setting, right after the storm, resembled a moment in mid-July, but we came to welcome the sunny warmth, the rays of light relaxing us, putting us at ease.

While wandering off the trail to skirt the fallen trees, we got lost on higher ground, losing sight of the path altogether, until finally we found the pond on its north side, where we'd never been. We scrambled on the slope of a hill, crackling the branches (as deer do), stumbling on a rusty fence, progressing slowly, arriving, in the end, from the opposite direction, at the spot that we knew: the bench.

It was holding a massive trunk.

"Not for people anymore," I said, looking for a corner to sit a moment.

Again we were the only two on the trail, and we watched a pair of ducks swim from side to side of the pond, "with no sound," he remarked. "And no disturbance in the water," I replied. Less orange, the deep pond was now rather red and reflective.

"As if they were swimming on the surface of a mirror," he said.

"Gentle, faithful companions," I replied, the same two, perhaps, that we had watched in the past, when we sat on that wooden bench.

This time we crouched on the platform beneath it. The seat was upended, dismantled by logs, clutched by roots, embedded in soil. The boardwalk beside it was broken in half, forming a peak in the middle, a steep incline, which we couldn't have followed anyway. He looked at his watch and turned us around.

"How could they snap?" he asked at almost every fallen tree, the matting at each base upright before us — like a wall or a painting to study. We pondered the mystery of the impossibility, the largeness of the formerly hidden anchor rising out of the ground, while the tree itself lay behind the saucer, requiring a different sort of peering and probing.

Death had exposed what life concealed.

Beautiful deaths, I still felt, the sadness admitting a little joy, though I wasn't ready to utter the word.

"I'll hug this one," he said, bending over a massive trunk. Wrapping his arms around the lichen-covered white and silver bark, he couldn't embrace the circumference, so he stood up, smiling and enthralled by the tactile experience of, and proximity to, nature's ruined magnificence. Three large poplars had collapsed together, their roots intertwined in life, we could see, one likely knocked over first, bringing the other two with it: death for all three, their length beside us, their bottoms above our heads.

The woods had been turned upside down.

While climbing under and over the obstructions, we would slow and stop, not wanting to leave the forest enclosure, our words fewer, our silences more prolonged, the mystery mingled with faint familiarity.

Blue jays. A throaty raven. Woodpeckers. Black-capped chickadees. Wrens and other small birds. Ruffed grouse. Ducks. Mushrooms. Lichen. Fungi. Ferns. Red squirrels. Sweet cedar and balsam fir needles.

He most liked the silent glide of the ducks. And I? What was the definitive moment for me? The warm, gentle, intermittently sunlit, moderately moist atmosphere, which had put me at ease with every step, in the company of a

friend: our eyes and ears shared, and enlarged, as we walked and perceived in tandem, one behind the other.

Having returned to the woods one week after the storm, we were already watching the forest evolve. Previously demolished and rearranged, it was stirring, minutely, to a splinter of new life, to a little artistry and a semblance of music, like the insects' activity under the bark: their own minute cavities and tunnels and patchwork designs.

Had Fiona opened the fallen trees like books, as sources of knowledge, formerly hidden, now revealed?

I walked home on my own for part of the way, as he rushed ahead to meet his friends. "Already late," he announced, even before we left the woods.

◆

OCTOBER 11. IN A FLASH, HE WAS ON THE GROUND: a crumpled figure. He had stumbled on fallen branches, still scattered across the trail, his right knee bent and jammed into the leaves, his backpack banging on his body as three yellow quinces, picked earlier, rolled out. His hat had fallen off, and his hiking poles had tumbled out of his hands.

As he lay on the ground — startled, I was sure — I rushed to his side. This strong man, honoured by his Viking ancestry, taking brave, bold adventures into the wilderness, seeking remoteness while knowing the ways of nature, never (rarely) flinching.

Until now.

I couldn't have anticipated the accident, and so suddenly his frailty was apparent as I had never seen it before. He had been talking and looking backward, as I followed behind, his mind likely distracted when his feet became tangled in the debris. Remnants of the hurricane still cluttered the forest floor, humbling a nature lover — a strident walker — reduced to the helplessness of a child: a broken human being among the broken trees.

He didn't cry out as a child might, though I would have preferred that honest response to his quick rise. Stoically determined not to stop, he bent to collect the ripened fruit and his hat, when I gestured to do that for him.

"Stand still for a minute," I said as I held his arm. "Take a breath."

But he marched on, a little more slowly, as if nothing had occurred.

He had tumbled among the trees. Once so sturdy, they too were brittle: snapped and split and overturned, their branches and leaves now dead or dying, dried and drained of colour. I had witnessed the weakness — the vulnerability — of his muscular form, folded on the ground, which he couldn't see, of course, too eager, I felt, to show off his strength, to carry on.

"Did you hurt your weak knee?" I asked.

His "good" knee had hit the ground, he said, with relief, a little humanity emerging in those frank words, but he buried the deeper feeling (of fear, perhaps) as we walked along the eastern trail, where green and coloured leaves still hung in the canopy, the intermittent rays of light bringing a fleeting brilliance to our eyes.

We looked and looked but didn't sit and didn't see the pair of ducks.

Our pair-ness, too, had broken.

The hike that day wasn't the same. From the start, his harshness, as I saw it, clashed with my sensitivity, so I was upset before we stepped on

the trail, the conflict continuing once we had set out. Even there, he insisted on making his point, repeatedly, pausing only when we passed the intricate, orchid-like, pearl-coloured mushroom growing on the end of a wet log.

"Exactly where it appeared last year," I recalled, before admiring its layers of petals.

Then, when he fell, we stopped talking altogether. Were the two related, the tension (with me) distracting him from his feet? Nothing was the same after that, although still lovely and pleasant and quiet and beautifully aromatic, even if, in the end, a little chilly.

On the following morning, a watercolour drawing on stiff white board appeared at my door: An image of a single wild apple, no larger than a quince, collected on one of our hikes before the hurricane. A gesture of friendship and peace.

The painted apple was a little lopsided, its brown stem noticeably angled, as if the fruit, though not bruised, had fallen long ago, its skin lined with amber and gold.

◆

DECEMBER 3. FOR THE FIRST TIME IN ALMOST TWO months, our hiking resumed. What would we find in the forest? The chaos intact? A semblance of order? A measure of both?

In October, most of the trees still had leaves, and the woods were terribly tangled in places. Going left, not right, at the first fork, after the first ravine, for a freer path, we would turn back at the pond to come out the same way, only occasionally completing the entire loop with manageable variations.

Inigorated, though saddened, we had climbed under or over or around the trunks, where trees — in pairs or triplets or groups of five or six — were blocking the way, as my friend snapped the branches to get us through. Sometimes he crawled on his knees, catching his backpack on broken twigs. I gently unhooked the mesh pockets from behind, hating to find him trapped on the ground, looking a little tenuous — and aged — and not as agile and as strong as I once imagined him to be. In these moments, I was quietly troubled, all over again, by a vision of human fragility.

But not when he said, on that December day, "Nature loves to hide."

Four words: his words. Familiar, but fresh in this moment, this context.

He had crouched to the ground when he uttered the thought, not to crawl or to negotiate pieces of the fallen forest but to turn over a nearby rock.

"Look underneath," he remarked. "Nothing," he said, except for the moist, rain-drenched soil. He tried again. "Too small," he muttered, dropping the stone, as he found another, which looked like the first, but it too revealed only a vacant hole in the mud.

"For what?" I asked, intrigued by the mystery and his determination.

"Salamanders." He had found them under stones in the past.

Right there, I wondered, so close to the pond, and is that where they went when Fiona came? But he didn't reply. We climbed up the slope, looking down from above, where dozens of trees had collapsed, though moss was growing profusely, brightly, freshly.

The mushrooms, like the salamanders, were gone. Not one remained, apart from a couple of remnants, charcoal in colour, "as if burnt,"

I said, their stems dislodged from the earth and lying, discretely, in tatters. The ducks too had vanished, and the leaves underfoot were wet and flat, in various tones of brown.

By early December, much had changed. But those four words — "Nature loves to hide" — offered an echo of former hikes, when he frequently said, "We hear more than we see. Animals hide." This time, though, he ascribed a verb, "loves," to nature, as if to capture intent: deliberation and deliberateness.

He came down the hill to the wild apple tree, which no longer held its yellow fruit, and none remained in the mud at its base, to be kept — embraced — for the winter, in the warmth of the earth. And his thought came again, more simply this time: Where had the apples gone?

"Things disappear into nature," he said.

"But nature itself disappears," I replied, thinking of the blackberry bushes ahead, the limbs of the shrubs, without the fruit, now twisted and bare, like the wild apple tree.

Ages — and stages — of people and plants: my friend looking older, sometimes, as the woods in December appeared to be grey and exposed, the trunks that had snapped — folded in two, cracked in half — now revealed, without any leaves to hide the disfiguration, the crumpled linearity.

"The destruction," he asserted.

A design, of sorts, I countered, and wind, not human hands, had exerted the force.

The hike had a quiet purity — as we paused and progressed and shared back and forth. While he fingered the rotting bark — "So soft," he would say — I cherished the rings on the stumps: delicate patterns in perfect circles or more organically traced, circuitously, like spiders' webs, the lines in the wood as thin as threads, altering in tone from orange to amber to cream.

Yes, beautiful ruins. The wreckage had started to chime for me, as if a little harmony might emerge, somehow, from beating wind and thrashing rain.

Wind chimes, maybe: music that needed a current of air to reconfigure and slowly expose nature's reclusive intent.

Moments later, he saw the bird, a tiny grey thing on a damp, dark tree.

"With a white breast?" I asked. "Is that how you saw it, or through its darting motion?"

"The white breast," he confirmed.

The bird's diminutive movements and small sounds — chirps and squeaks — countered the gusts of wind, its roaring, rolling fullness far above the little creature, and above us, in our own stillness. We were hidden from the wind, as the bird was hidden, almost, from our eyes, and we from it, maybe, but our senses were sharpened with every step — which ones to use? — as we stayed alert to the setting.

While watching the tilt at the tops of the trees, with feathery softness, I realized that we felt not even a little breeze ourselves — a lovely sensory contradiction.

"Like the ocean," he said.

"Or like waves," I replied, having put that thought in my mind before he mentioned the ocean. We had made the comparison to water in the past, though never using precisely these terms.

Then we too were gone, home by three o'clock, chilled but refreshed, the sun having swiftly retreated, disappearing behind the clouds, which had come with the wind. Withdrawn from the world for two hours, again the only hikers on the trail, we were finding an art in the woods, a cloistered, inherent design, unearthed and exposed and rearranged by an inhospitable stranger: an exotic tropical storm, flush with *vinea*, a feminine touch.

◆

DECEMBER 16. WE WEREN'T SURE: SHOULD WE GO or not? Snow had covered the ground during an unusual early blizzard, with blustery wind and the risk of heavy rain.

"The last hike, for a while," he said. He would leave on the train the following afternoon.

"A shorter route," I suggested, thinking of the railway tracks as an alternative, a more manageable option, out and back — not a big loop — and possibly free of snow.

"Dress warmly," he said, which I did, though my layers were never enough at that time of year,

Learning Submission

Grape stem trees
along the ravine
their bones
stripped clean,
brittle as they bend
to the will of the winds.

Cracked ice,
a parted mouth,
cold and searching
as lips soften in anticipation
of the bitter bite of frost.

The winter whispers into my ear,
and I remove my coat and cap;
I, too, am learning submission.

Selena Mercuri

Selena Mercuri is an MFA candidate in creative writing at the University of Guelph.

while he arrived without a hat and with fingerless gloves. Both of us walked in runners, not boots, soon to get wet or soaked, we knew. After meeting at the usual spot, in front of the library, we stepped into the vigorous wind.

"Let's try the trail," I said, not liking the wind. "We can always come back if the snow's too deep." So we didn't turn off at the tracks, after all, hoping for shelter inside the woods.

Trekking through knee-deep snow as soon as we entered the forest, we followed the foot-steps already there, which stopped at the base of the first ravine, while we went on. I tried from behind to place my foot inside his bigger print, a vertical tunnel into the snow, as if my friend were placing it there for me, for my smaller feet and slender legs.

Upward. Then flat. Then to the left.

"Not the whole loop," I insisted, wearied by the effort, the physical challenge, along with the bothersome feeling of cold, clammy feet.

"Silly to wear runners," we agreed, but we didn't turn back.

Astonishing beauty held us there: snow on the dark coniferous trees, snippets of lime-green moss spotting the ground, slivers of wood, still damp and decayed, crumbling and soft in our hands.

"And look," he remarked, "the white of the ice is different from the white of the snow."

We were standing on the slope above the pond, having gone down and come up. His poles were unable to pierce the surface.

"Creamy," I said, searching for a word. "Like porridge, almost."

"Milky," he thought, offering the slight variation, "or chalky."

"Yes, chalky," I exclaimed, liking the term, "or cloudy."

He preferred that final word, which led me, later, to notice another instance of white, in the clouds. When we looked to the west, expecting a gust on that open edge, which didn't come, they were tinted with pink, though he didn't detect the tone of pale rose that I saw, instead finding a lighter white in the lichen, inflected with green, blotched on the bark of the poplar trunks.

More whites appeared as we stepped through the snow. We weren't exposed to the wind, but we watched the tops of the tallest trees visibly rocking, creating the sound of waves, that marvel — and paradox — persisting from hike to hike, as we roamed freely, like animals.

"They're hiding," he said, "seeking shelter."

We too were sequestered, and we were right to have endured the climb, to get out of the wind, rather than to have taken the railway tracks, which wrap, without trees, around the base of the harbour.

"This might sound odd," he said. "The water sounds like broken glass."

"After yesterday's heavy rain," I reminded him.

"Yes, that's right. Like shattered, broken glass — tinkling," he added, and I said that I thought the image was lovely.

We did not descend to the wild apple tree, but we stopped to watch the clear water running through plants somehow not covered in snow, trickling down the hill.

Again I had been thinking about wind chimes, an instrument that makes its music from dangling shapes of porcelain or glass, as my dictionary describes the effect, using the word "tinkling," which my friend had also chosen.

For water.

For its bubbly, vivacious tumbling descent, along the gentle slope, under the wooden foot-bridge that we had just crossed: running water, in mid-December.

"Like a small waterfall," I remarked, remembering the voice of the wind in the trees earlier on — "sweeping," I had called it.

He likened the tiny waves to clinking glass: sharp-edged fragments musically clashing and colliding.

Twinned sounds.

Visually, too, they resembled each other: clear, colourless glass, and a clean stream, though the water was streaked with emerald, from the grasses and mosses and plants.

That's when he heard a rustle, "a squirrel or a bird," he said.

"Not a squirrel." I was sure of that.

Six feet away: a pileated woodpecker with a scarlet crest on its head, and black and white feathers on its body and wings, pecking at the bark at the base of a tree, nearer to the ground than we had ever seen.

"For insects?" I asked.

With a nod, he agreed, not wanting to speak, to disturb the bird, to send it away.

"I can't stay still for much longer," I whispered, shaking in the cold, not feeling the pleasantness of the forest anymore but knowing how long he would stop to watch wildlife — fifteen minutes for the owl he had seen weeks ago, on his own. So I led us ahead.

At dusk, we came down the final descent, never having hiked in that much snow, hearing the distinctive crunch of the wetness as our feet sank with every step. Our footprints were the

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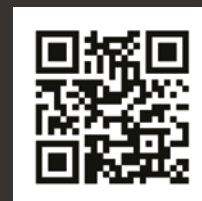
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first, even before the tracks of the animals, which we hadn't been able to find.

Unlike squirrels' feet or foxes' paws or deer's hooves, our shoes were clunky and heavy. We were clumsy in the woods, asking more questions than finding answers, never knowing absolutely, chastened by mystery: why wind blows where it does, catching certain trees and ravines, while skirting others, and why the animals rarely come out to make their presence known during our awkward but respectful intrusion on a quiet, wintry day.

Then we too disappeared.

◆
AS WE LEFT ONE SEASON AND ENTERED ANOTHER, had we forgotten the chaos in early autumn, when Fiona had flourished and quickly vanished, within a span of a couple of hours?

Green coniferous trees were holding the snow, a lovely duality of tones, the needles and limbs weighted and slumped, "umbrella-like," I noted, curving down, not springing up. The effect was majestic: fresh, invigorating, and stately, in the smallest and largest ravines, where wind hadn't upset the artful arrangement, linear whiteness on the arms of trees, poised in stillness.

My friend and I had trekked through mud that was under the snow, slipping and sliding, grasping the branches that lined the trail. We were mucking the beauty with our feet, stirring the reddish earth, while looking around to see, so close to our mess, what hadn't been altered since the fresh snowfall.

In fact, Fiona hadn't slipped out of our minds.

For three months, we had witnessed the contradiction. Although wind and water had battered the woods, destruction led to creation. Fury came first; then the beauty. Redemption followed the trauma — the suffering. Could either stand on its own, without the other? By then, I thought not. The woods, with time, began to chime because of the strength of the wind, which had broken and rearranged the trees, revealing the essence — and craft — of a forest.

We had found an internal design: tracery in the tangled trees, insects' tunnels under the bark, new niches and hollows for rodents and birds, green leaves on the ground on the toppled trunks for deer to eat, pine cones on the earth for squirrels to collect, decay to nurture the soil, radiant colours in the circular pond, new light coming in.

The story, this time, belonged to the wind: destroyer and artful creator.

As it blew from the north, on that final hike, I dreaded the exposure on the way home, which we felt in the open field. I hadn't dressed properly, I knew, which troubled my practical friend, who stopped to lean on his poles to make his point, his voice approaching a tone of frustration. "I'll buy you a winter coat," he called out, while I hurried along.

Leaving the woods to come home in the dark, I thought I heard a sweet sound bewitching our ears.

Yes, chiming.

For three months, pieces and parts of the fallen forest, like fragments of porcelain and broken glass, had mingled freely, creating — together — a little symphony of sorts.

Chamber music. Woodwinds and strings.

Baroque, of course.

Per sonatori, perhaps: a small, select ensemble, for a few players, chosen by Fiona, with her exquisite, singular sense of beauty. ▲

IN A NUTSHELL

Lady Ferry Sarah Orne Jewett

IN 1878, *THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY* PUBLISHED A number of short stories by the celebrated local colourist Sarah Orne Jewett, who wrote mostly of her native southern Maine. The following year, Houghton, Osgood and Company of Boston gathered those six pieces as part of *Old Friends and New*. The acclaimed collection also included "Lady Ferry," a new story about an unbelievably old woman.

Now Biblioasis has added Jewett's atmospheric tale to *Seth's Christmas Ghost Stories*, an annual series that seeks to revive the "charming" Victorian custom of "the telling or reading of ghost stories during long, dark, and cold Christmas nights." Complemented by striking full-spread black and white illustrations by Seth, *Lady Ferry* is about an impressionable young girl's chance encounter with a "bent, but very tall and slender" woman who cannot, it seems, die — "a creature who lives forever!"

Is this wrinkled but beautiful "Madam" a vampire, as the bats who trail her in the garden might suggest? A witch, as whispers of Salem would have it? Or perhaps "one of the oldtime fairies, who could vanish at their own will and pleasure"? The girl never reaches a definitive answer, though a dusty book eventually picked up "for a few coppers with the greatest satisfaction" in Amsterdam helps her get closer to understanding. The most disquieting part of Jewett's story is that readers, like the narrator, are ultimately left wondering if the ancient lady really did know Queen Elizabeth and Mary Queen of Scots and "poor Marie Antoinette" — long, long before that fateful meeting in nineteenth-century New England.

Lucky's Grove H. Russell Wakefield

WHILE PREPARING HIS NORTH BERKSHIRE ESTATE for the holidays, Mr. Braxton slips off to nap in his study. There his mind wanders to the nearby grove, which has long put him at unease. He sees the gathering of trees "glowing darkly in the womb of the fire before him." Having just discovered that one of his staff, Curtis, dug up a young fir to decorate for Christmas, Mr. Braxton feels his sense of dread turn into a "sudden gust of uncontrollable anger." This torrent of emotion is the first of many violences that sweep through H. Russell Wakefield's *Lucky's Grove* (Biblioasis).

As guests arrive over the coming days, the estate contends with increasingly sinister incidents. A tempest descends upon the manor, the heat blazes uncontrollably, a bulb explodes

Trick or Treat?

Ghost stories for Halloween and beyond

during the tree lighting, and one of the Braxton grandchildren builds a terrifying omen in the snow: a snarling, wolf-headed snake. One night everyone dreams of "dim, uncertain and yet somehow urgent happenings in and around the house." Soon Curtis falls severely ill, and one of the cowmen, whose face was cut by a branch, succumbs to blood poisoning.

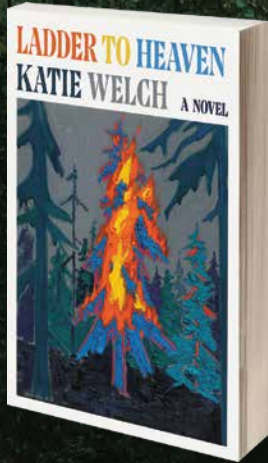
With the uprooting of a single fir, Wakefield unearths interminable malevolence and darkness. Replete with encroaching storms and looming treetops, Seth's carefully placed art amplifies an already suspenseful tale. The tenor mirrors the pervasive terror of this ghost-less haunting — and the final two-page illustration portends the tragedy to come.

The Mistress in Black Rosemary Timperley

IF EVER HE RUNS OUT OF SOURCE MATERIAL, RYAN Murphy, the television producer known for *American Horror Story*, would do well to consult *The Mistress in Black* (Biblioasis), a taut account of a twenty-five-year-old teacher's disquieting first day at an all-girls school with a secret.

While "trembling a little," the narrator interviews for an English literature position at a seemingly mysterious place "a train journey away" from her home. Hired on the spot, Miss Anderson returns at the start of the winter term, only to encounter a "woman in black, looking at me seriously, with those beautiful sad dark eyes." None of her colleagues, however, appear to notice the apparition, who turns out to be Joanna Carey, a formerly beloved educator who somehow turned "more and more cynical, to the point of cruelty." After subtle prying, Anderson learns that her predecessor doused the "long curtains in the gymnasium with paraffin and set fire to them," intentionally killing herself along with an infatuated student, "little Joan Hanley," in the process. Or did she?

Timperley, a British novelist and the editor of several anthologies of ghost stories, unravels the disarming mystery of Miss Carey and young Joan with deft economy. "Maybe ghosts are people in purgatory and we see them around us all the time without realizing that they are ghosts," her narrator comments near the end, before she watches out her classroom window as "two retreating figures cast no shadows on the snow, and left no footprints." The story's foreboding and quick resolution are accentuated by Seth's equally skillful work, including a small spot illustration on the book's title page of a deceptively simple matchbook. An animated match brings to mind a finger, gesturing readers into these troubled corridors. ▲



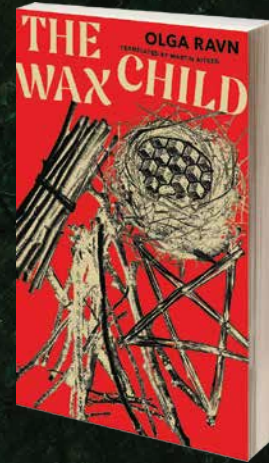
A dangerous journey in search of family and forgiveness.

WOLSAK & WYNN
Ladder to Heaven
Katie Welch
Fiction



"An unforgettable story of the evocative resonance of one's past."
—Don Aker

GREAT PLAINS PRESS
Songs From This and That Country
Gail Sidonie Šobat
Fiction



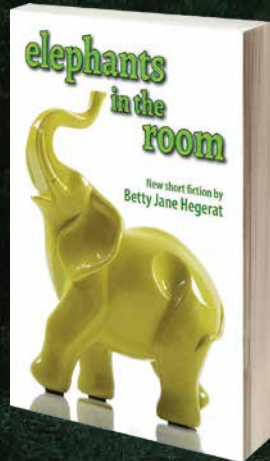
An extraordinary, haunting tale of witchcraft and persecution.

BOOK*HUG PRESS
The Wax Child
Olga Ravn, translated by Martin Aitken
Fiction



Characters in search of a cure for cosmic loneliness.

ANVIL PRESS
Carthaginian Peace & Other Stories
Evie Christie
Short Stories



A new collection by a master of the "domestic" short story.

SHADOWPAW PRESS
Elephants in the Room
Betty Jane Hegerat
Short Stories



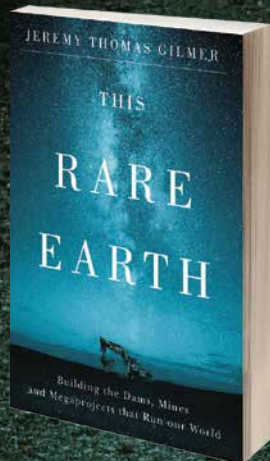
Beautifully crafted stories in which older people confront their pasts.

MAWENZI HOUSE
A Quiet Disappearance
Rabindranath Maharaj
Short Stories



Behind-the-scenes stories of life below deck.

BREAKWATER BOOKS
Ship Moms
True Tales of Love and Lust at Sea
Jen Winsor
Nonfiction



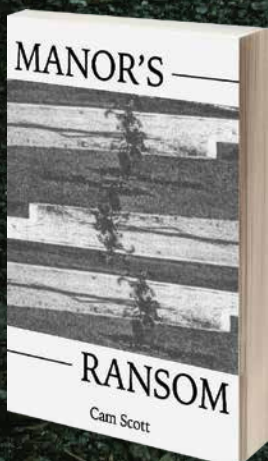
"Immersive and propulsive."
—David Huebert

VÉHICULE PRESS
This Rare Earth
Building the Dams, Mines, and Megaprojects that Run Our World
Jeremy Thomas Gilmer
Nonfiction



Empowering stories that break the silence on postpartum depression.

CAITLIN PRESS
Beyond Blue
Stories of Heartbreak, Healing, and Hope in Postpartum Depression
Christina Myers & Oga Nwobosi, Eds.
Anthology



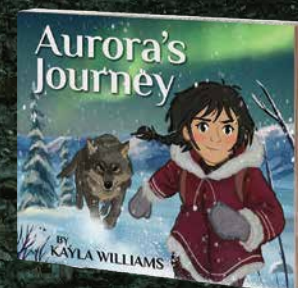
A poetry collection of politically-inflected city poems.

ARP BOOKS
Manor's Ransom
Cam Scott
Poetry



Comics celebrating love in all its diverse forms.

RENEGADE ARTS
Love
Alberta Comics
Anthology
Alexander Finbow and Shea Proulx, Eds.
Graphic Novel



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Last Resort

Grace Flahive's fearless debut

Alyanna Chua

Palm Meridian

Grace Flahive

Simon & Schuster

256 pages, softcover, ebook, and audiobook

WHAT COMPELS A THIRTYSOME-thing Canadian novelist to set her debut in a Florida community teeming with octogenarians? In *Palm Meridian*, Grace Flahive could be writing about her own precarious future. The year is 2067. The polar ice caps have melted and tropical storms batter the coast. The “sprawling Disney empire” is little more than barnacled rubble. “By now, a third of the United States was without a reliable power grid,” Flahive writes. “California was on fire more than it wasn’t. There was a generally held belief in Florida that the whole of Orlando could explode in a giant fireball, and Washington wouldn’t know or care for at least a week.”

But inside the Palm Meridian Retirement Resort, queer women in their seventies and eighties — “precious things on an increasingly tumultuous planet” — are getting tipsy in hat-making class, podcasting in their spare time, and organizing tap dance recitals. Even though the lights flicker and cell service is spotty, the croquet mallets are swinging and the hula hoops are spinning.

In this absurd environment, Hannah Cardin, a seventy-seven-year-old resident with terminal cancer, has chosen to end her own life with medical assistance. “The suffering would be great, the pain likely unbearable. Life would not be life,” she decides. We meet the former engineer on the morning before her scheduled death. Her clique — Christine, a retired journalist; Esme, a friend from university; Nate, the “calm, capable” bartender; and Ricky, a twenty-five-year-old staffer — and a boisterous supporting cast have gathered to plan an all-night celebration of her life. The story unfolds over the course of the day leading up to the festivities. Throughout, flashbacks dip into Hannah’s past, including her childhood in Montreal, the fast ascent of her eco-energy company, and her enduring friendship with her business partner, Luke. Hovering over it all is her long-lost love, Sophie, whose invitation to the festivities was “safely delivered,” though she has yet to respond.

Many millennials and zoomers tend to picture the future as a slow-motion apocalypse consisting of ecological collapse, political chaos, and social isolation. Instead of looking at despair, Flahive brings us into the raucous minds of a group of seniors who have chosen to be joyful. More than how people will die, the author wonders how they will live — and how



With her sunset state of mind.

they’ll party as the flood waters rise. This is a utopia tucked inside a dystopia. Some readers may find the world-building too light — and the perspectives too lighthearted — but others will recognize it as a hopeful vision.

Flahive finds comedy in the morbid: “For the first day in ten years, Hannah wasn’t wearing sunscreen. Given the cremation, she figured she could afford a bit of crisp.” Partygoers (or mourners) arrive bearing hugs, kisses, and parting gifts — but “when would she use them?” Even today’s youthful quirks and trends endure into old age. The Pomodoro time management technique inspires the resort’s baseball team, whose uniforms sport “the logo of a determined-looking tomato, grasping a clock and leaping into the sky.” The team captain shrugs: “Couldn’t get these folks to practice for more than twenty-five minutes, so we leaned into it.”

Although set in the Sunshine State, the story frequently drifts back to winter. Raised by a Zamboni driver, Hannah grew up in a mostly unheated apartment in Mile End, in a family just scraping by. Enduring extreme temperatures became the problem she devoted her career to solving, culminating in her invention of “a groundbreaking heating and cooling technology.” Wintertime also became synonymous with love; Hannah met Sophie, an Olympic ski jumper, on a chilly day in Manhattan. Although their relationship eventually unravels, Hannah feels that “Sophie would always come back to her, in a way, with the snow. The winters would return her, or at least the feeling of her.” In a

novel steeped in finality — of love, of time, of the world as we know it — snow suggests the cyclical nature of life and memory.

◆
WHILE *PALM MERIDIAN* HAS A STRONG EMOTIONAL core, its execution is inconsistent. The prose suffers from an overreliance on telling rather than showing. Describing a pitch Hannah made at a turning point in her career, Flahive writes, “Once she’d got through the preamble and onto the science of things, she’d felt the nerves rise off her body like vapor, and her sluggish brain picked up pace.” Even the early days of Hannah and Sophie’s relationship are condensed into a few breezy lines. In glossing over key moments, Flahive flattens Hannah and the memories she confronts during her final hours.

The novel’s biggest structural challenge lies in its large ensemble. From a couple composed of “tall Eileen” and “small Eileen” to Esme’s jilted lover to Nate’s would-be girlfriend, the resort is full of personalities — perhaps too many. New characters arrive often, each one introduced with a flurry of eccentricities, only to fade as quickly as they appeared. The group feels more like a sketch board of character ideas than like a coherent community.

Nonetheless, to read *Palm Meridian* is to be in the company of a writer willing to ask big, messy questions. What does it mean to live a good life? How do we let go of the people we love? Can we build something beautiful within ruins? Flahive, clearly, is unafraid to answer them with wild, warm-hearted optimism. ▲

Double Trouble

Eddy Boudel Tan launches an investigation

Kevin Shaw

The Tiger and the Cosmonaut

Eddy Boudel Tan

Viking

336 pages, softcover, ebook, and audiobook

WHEN I OPEN INSTAGRAM, I'M often presented with an ad for the streaming service Mubi. Over a curated selection of queer films, a bolded line reads, "This is not a coming out story." The implication seems to be that our community, that nebulous alphabet of sexual identities, has transcended the need for stories of our emergence from the closet. To continue revisiting these tropes, the sponsored post suggests, dooms us to remain in a perpetual creative — and political — adolescence. However, as long as we live in a time and place in which heterosexuality remains compulsory, to paraphrase Adrienne Rich, coming out stories will matter.

The closet remains a spectral presence in Eddy Boudel Tan's *The Tiger and the Cosmonaut*. When we meet the narrator, Casper Han, he's already in his mid-thirties. He has moved away from his isolated hometown of Wilhelm, British Columbia, to Vancouver — and from his shame-filled adolescence into an ostensibly happy adulthood. When his father goes missing, Casper and his partner, Anthony — an actor who is "almost impaired by sincerity" — return to the "lonely place five hours north of the city" to join the search. Their arrival unearths an incident from Casper's past, one that he has kept from Anthony: his identical twin, Sam, disappeared nearly two decades earlier and was never found.

The novel moves between these two time frames, which are linked by recurring images of performance and doubling. Its title refers to the costumes the nine-year-old brothers were wearing on the night that Sam "walked into the forest and never came back." As Casper deepens his dual investigation into the mysteries, Anthony suddenly decides to go back to Vancouver. (In this otherwise tightly plotted story, I'd question the point of Anthony at all, but his privilege and his easygoing family make him a useful foil for Casper, who feels like an outsider at home.) Throughout, Casper replays — sometimes literally, with old home movies — his traumatic upbringing and, at twenty-three, the mortifying exposure of his first love. "Beneath the fear and humiliation, I felt relief," he says of the circulated video that outed him. "There was no longer any reason to hide. This was who we were, all the sweat and the filth in poor resolution."

Boudel Tan carefully expresses the difference between choosing and being forced to



How did he lose his twin brother — and a part of himself?

come out — a distinction that is relevant for someone like Casper, who reads in a magazine about the self-loathing among Asian Canadians that "resulted in the common practice of coming out much later in life than their non-Asian peers." When Casper has the opportunity to speak with the journalist himself, he balks. "My costume was hanging on the closet door," he says of a childhood memory, layering the figurative and domestic facades that ruled his adolescence. "I didn't want to be me anymore." Even so, Casper comes to understand his sexuality in relation to his racial identity. "The problem wasn't the kiss itself but the fact that we were boys," he realized, after being caught by his twin. "There were different rules for boys, just as there were unspoken rules determined by the colour of one's skin."

With *The Tiger and the Cosmonaut*, Boudel Tan continues to play with the rules of the domestic suspense genre. His debut, *After Elias*, could be overly ponderous at times, and the plot of his propulsive *The Rebellious Tide* was occasionally far-fetched and convoluted. Here Boudel Tan achieves a balance between introspection and action. One of the pleasures of reading a thriller is teasing out the truth and parsing the witness statements. Casper's narration follows two inquiries: the mystery of his missing twin and the search for his authentic self. In both cases, the lines between lying and omission — or between reality and invention — become blurred. The book draws a parallel between the dread a young queer person may feel at

home and the encroaching terror induced by the best suspense fiction. For Casper, just having Anthony meet his parents is fraught, even though it's been years since he was outed. "Under normal circumstances," he thinks, seeing his partner in his childhood bedroom, "this moment would have terrified me. I'd never brought home a boyfriend before."

While heterosexual marriage and its indiscretions typically power works like these (Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* comes to mind), Boudel Tan considers parent-child dynamics as the source of danger. In his previous books, he excelled at showing how disorientation and travel can ignite family tensions. Here he turns his attention to his narrator's own backyard. He casts Wilhelm — its seedy bars and motels, its familiar homes and folklore — as the place where Casper's "present life superimposed on the past, as if cut from a photograph and pasted onto a faded backdrop." If we can't truly go home again, Boudel Tan suggests, it's because we're always already there.

Although Casper has moved away, it becomes clear that he hasn't moved on. By unearthing memories and long-buried truths, he reconciles how the past has continued to affect his present. "It's tragic," he finally admits, "the ways we hide so much of ourselves." *The Tiger and the Cosmonaut* shows how, for even the most well-adjusted among us, coming out is less of a one-way ticket to Fire Island than a round-trip fare. Despite the carry-on limit, we bring our closets with us. ▲

Daybooks

Counting the hours with Kate Cayley and Souvankham Thammavongsa

Emily Mernin

Property

Kate Cayley

Coach House Books

256 pages, softcover and ebook

Pick a Colour

Souvankham Thammavongsa

Knopf Canada

192 pages, hardcover, ebook, and audiobook

TWO WOMEN, NAT AND FRANKIE, AWAIT the arrival of their dinner guests. It is an early spring evening, not yet dark. The “drills and hammers and music” that filled the streets of their “up-and-coming” Toronto neighbourhood all afternoon have been replaced by the distant sound of a brass band. They each take a shot of tequila. They kiss. “Nat tilted her head back, letting the day and her upset wash over her,” indulging in a moment of pleasure before their ten-year-old daughter, Clio, bursts into the kitchen. And they remember that their son, Felix, still hasn’t returned home.

“Where was Felix?” This refrain rings throughout the final third of Kate Cayley’s *Property*. A third-person narrator wanders in and out of Nat’s mind as she fights the urge to abandon their evening plans and go look for her twelve-year-old child. Between her thoughts, memories, and worries, there are extended descriptions of the couple’s recently renovated home: “They had arrived in their settled lives: the grey-and-blue rug that echoed the blue walls, the soporific beeswax candles with their squat flames, the low sun through the window above the sink, in the backyard flashing spears of green coming up from the bulbs they’d planted in the fall, the raised beds surrounded by a fur of early grass.”

The domestic space is slick with symbolism, mirroring the tension that rises and falls between the women in the span of a few minutes. Shortly after their intimate brush against the counter, they come to a superficial impasse about dessert. “Nat didn’t know how that happened,” Cayley writes, of the sudden silence. “How two people could carry twenty years between them and yet not help falling into standoffs over things neither would remember.” As quickly as it opens, the chasm between them disappears from view as their neighbours — Maddy, Alex, and their children, Sylvie and Milo — ring the doorbell.

◆

PROPERTY IS SET OVER THE COURSE OF ONE DAY. IT is rich with revealing passages, in which minutes are laden with flashes of worry, desire, and shame. Divided into three parts — “Morning,” “Afternoon,” and “Evening” — it is an elegant

manipulation of time. In rending open fleeting moments and inserting them under her microscope, Cayley creates an environment in which everything has heightened meaning and in which no action or transgression, however small, is without potential consequence.

Much like Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, which the novel is clearly indebted to, *Property* follows a woman preparing to welcome guests — in this case, for a “stupid dinner.” We first meet Nat before nine in the morning, when “the sun was pale gold, the real heat beginning,” watching Clio and Sylvie, her best friend, cross the lawn and head toward school. As Felix eats breakfast, Nat’s to-do list for the day unfurls



Many undercurrents of a single afternoon.

in her head, veering from mundane tasks like “check ingredients” into a stream of anxiety: “Host a dinner party even if it is an affectation to think of it as a dinner party and Frankie is right she doesn’t really like them or that’s not right either Alex is just bland and she is sorry for Maddy these days but Maddy doesn’t like Clio after all that stuff at school...”

While rarely losing sight of Nat’s perspective, the narrator also moves between the minds of those who surround her. We peer into the days of her children and various locals, including the old woman down the block who “saw everything” from between her curtains, “the walking man” who aimlessly paces around, and Ilya, a handyman working on an

empty home. Their gentrifying street itself is a character. “All the houses in this part of the city are crooked,” Cayley writes. “Foundations cracked, water running beneath.” The various construction projects under way are at odds with the clay ground, which acts as an obstacle to progress. Similarly, hordes of “scurrying and splashing” rats underline how temporary — and futile — human homes are. On the very first page, we learn that “later in this day, when someone dies, it will not trouble” them; the rodents will carry on, tunnelling, burrowing, and chewing their way through basements.

As death looms, the characters navigate a seemingly normal day. The anticipation of tragedy is emphasized by Nat’s long-standing concerns for Felix, whose solitary nature unnerves her. Toward the end of the morning, while mixing bread dough, she finds herself “agonizing” over his unhappiness. Again and again, her thoughts circle around the idea that he is sociopathic. “What if she’d ignored all the signs?” While picking up her children from school, she imagines her family as characters in a horror story. She decides that she would be eaten. Clio would be the last one standing, the “Final Girl” to defeat the axe-wielding killer. Frankie “would make the best of it.” And Felix would be “a shut-in,” unless, of course, he was the murderer. Even though she tries to shift her focus — “Stop it,” she tells herself repeatedly — she compulsively wonders about his future.

Interludes centred on Felix challenge his mother’s idea of him, revealing the inner world of a misanthropic preteen whose sensitivity to injustice makes him quick to flare. After an altercation on the street sets him off, he runs away from Nat. She is forced to go home and wait. “She wanted to trust him,” Cayley writes. “She didn’t trust him.” Unbeknownst to his parents, he ends up sidetracked, scouring the area for the old woman’s missing dog.

With Felix’s disappearance, Cayley adds a new layer of dread. By the time they sit down for dinner, the language is thick with foreboding. The future — full of regret and what-ifs — begins to bleed into the story. In retrospect, when Nat thinks of how many times she wanted to leave the table to look for Felix but didn’t, “she is angry with Frankie and with herself.” And though “Clio privately believes for the rest of her life” that she heard her brother and the old woman yelling out for the dog, she justifies her own inaction: “She couldn’t have heard clearly enough to know who was shouting, or why.” As the tragedy slowly unfolds, Cayley’s simple prose belies the intricate temporal framework.

The slippery nature of time has been a structuring force across Cayley’s work. In “Trying

New York City 1972

My grandmother arrived in New York City
clutching her past like a bag
with the bottom falling out.

Her daughter remained in Seoul
searching for her second birthday
in a pay phone.

Pigeons crested
a thread of wind
sucked through the teeth
of the jagged grey skyline.

The air below was warm and thin
full of sound and smoke
like the breath left in a dead bird
BANG
motorcycles muttered something obscene and untranslatable.

Freddy Huyen Smith

*Freddy Huyen Smith is the author of Resting on Hardness.
He lives in Sackville, New Brunswick.*

to Explain Time to Children," from her 2023 collection, *Lent*, she writes, "You will not recognize it. It will feel ordinary. / You will be as you have been: / at a loss and decisive, complete and broken." Elsewhere she lingers on temporality, especially within domestic spaces: "I must praise household objects. / For they conquer time patiently." Read alongside her fiction, these poems — one of which is called "Of Rats and Floods" — reinforce how fruitful a single image or idea can be. Cayley's mastery of these interlocking themes is on full display in *Property*.

KATE CAYLEY TURNS TO THE CIRCADIAN NOVEL TO explore the way people intersect and alter the course of one another's lives. In Souvankham Thammavongsa's hands, the form becomes a profound if claustrophobic study of one woman's interiority. Ning is a retired boxer

living in a tiny apartment on top of her nail salon. Her athletic discipline has found another outlet in the obsessive routine of work. "I can't remember the last time I spent any time away from it," she thinks, after waking up. "I live down there, really."

The slim book borrows its title from the first thing Ning says to clients: "Pick a colour." The seemingly innocuous phrase speaks to what she has built her solitary adult life around: the imperative to minimize all personal interactions. "I am alone because I want to be," she maintains. "I am a family of one." When we meet Ning, she has insulated herself from the outside world entirely, except for the dribble of culture that comes in through the shop's door.

"Everyone is ugly," Ning says in the opening line. "I should know. I look at people all day." This coarseness sets the tone for what's to come. While navigating a single day in her small

shop, she offers a stoic indictment of the North American wellness industry, particularly of its vanity and xenophobia. Her thoughts coalesce into a critique of the way all of us — some more than others — are forced to shed our identities to participate in society. Ning is hyperaware of this aspect of the immigrant experience. "The brightly lit box we work in is called 'Susan's,'" she says, explaining that she dubs all the women on her staff Susan, in addition to asking them all to dress the same and wear their hair the same length.

The shop is an ecosystem constructed from Ning's idea of the docile personas that people expect to find there. Unlike some of her employees, she seems content to be an unknowable blank slate as she approaches forty-two. "It's a good age to be," she thinks. "I don't have to become anything anymore." Clinging to routine, she is stringent about her methods for handling the egos of customers. Her control is atmospheric; it extends to everything, from the appointment log to the phrases they use, the way they pump lotion, and the time they spend on certain treatments: "I watch everything closely. The girls don't like it." Although she is didactic and harsh, Ning has a real softness for the women who work for her. She lets them gossip in front of customers in their shared language, occasionally joining in, and accepts that they probably criticize her too. "As long as it stays behind my back," she thinks. "It's how they bond with each other. Talking about me."

Ning's voice is as unforgettable as it is detached. As the afternoon progresses, she dips into traumatic memories of her intense relationships with her former boxing coach and her old boss. Recounted with indifference, these moments begin to explain the wedge Ning has put between herself and others. "And that thing I have been told — protect yourself at all times — I still do it," she says. "Just can't let anybody in." By the time she receives an unwelcome visitor at the end of her shift, it is clear that insecurity, much more than business savvy, has written the rules she lives by.

With *Pick a Colour*, her highly anticipated first novel, Souvankham Thammavongsa provides her readers with a singular guide to harrowing truths about class, loneliness, and the art of self-preservation. ▲

STELLAR FICTION FROM LLP!

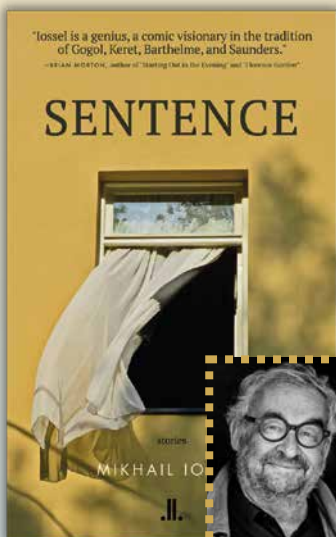
Sentence

by Mikhail Iossel

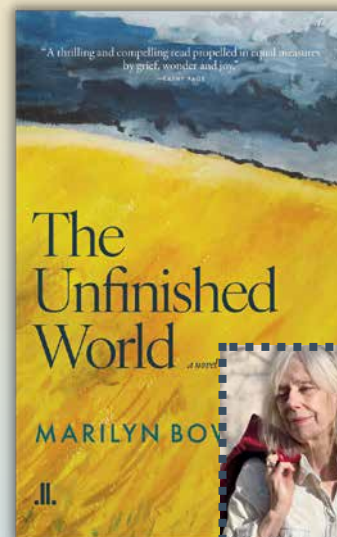
Sentence is a remarkable juggling act between genres and countries, memory and imagination, past and present — a celebration of linguistic freedom and virtuosity.

"Although James is a master of the prolix sentence, Iossel runs even farther in a joyride that evokes James Joyce's *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*."

—Michael Greenstein, *Seaboard Review of Books*



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The Unfinished World

by Marilyn Bowering

This magnificent novel asks if stories can play a role in offering opportunities for acts of courage, love and kindness. Will Pearl take what she needs from her inheritance; and does her story hold out possibilities not only for her own future but for our own?

The Unfinished World is a beautiful novel that performs a remarkable trick with history, time, and memory, a brilliant interweaving that is both teasingly cerebral and richly heartfelt."

—Bill Gaston, *Juliet Was a Surprise*

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And Sew Forth

Katherine Ashenburg pulls on a thread

Rohan Maitzen

Margaret's New Look

Katherine Ashenburg

Knopf Canada

304 pages, hardcover, ebook, and audiobook

THE MUSEUM CURATOR MARGARET Abrams is deep into preparations for an exhibition on Christian Dior's legendary 1947 "New Look" collection when mysterious packages start arriving. First a scarf with a "sentimental pattern of hearts, flowers, hot-air balloons and pairs of dogs," then a brooch, then another scarf—this one tartan and accompanied by a menacing note: "What side are you on?" Margaret is mystified. What is there to take sides on about the French designer whose work exemplifies "artistry and unapologetic beauty"?

A lot, it turns out. For one thing, as a visiting fashion historian explains, the strange items that keep appearing are "coded signals of the Resistance." They hint at questions about Dior's conduct during the Nazi occupation of France, an issue raised more explicitly by a reporter probing the designer's relationships with people later condemned as collaborators. Margaret's intern Keitha also keeps pestering her about the corsets used to create his iconic hourglass shape. "How many women really have that ultra-slim, high-breasted, round-hipped silhouette?" she demands. "And yet Dior designed all his clothes on that fantasy." Keitha's concerns are reiterated by a group of graduate students who associate the "confining, fantasy-inducing garments" with bondage. Margaret urges them to allow for complexity, to see Dior's work both "as homages to women and their beauty" and "as expressions of disdain for women." Privately, though, she resents their insistence on politicizing the exquisitely crafted creations: "Not for the first time, she saw herself as a rare remaining believer in art for art's sake." How is she "to rescue *her* Dior" from these attacks?

Despite herself, Margaret becomes increasingly caught up in what she is learning about the historical context of Dior's textiles and especially about his contemporaries who did not come through the occupation so unscathed. One of these is Dior's youngest sister, Catherine, a Resistance fighter who was imprisoned before eventually escaping while on a death march: "While he learned his trade in Lelong's studio, she risked her life. While she shunned anything German after the war, her brother began taking shows and collections to Germany beginning as early as the late 1940s."

The curator also discovers the sad story of Fanny Berger, a Jewish hat maker and designer who lost her business and then, at Auschwitz,



The designer presented his debut collection on February 12, 1947, at Dior House in Paris.

her life. Can Margaret—*should* Margaret—look at Dior's dresses in the same way, with these stories on her mind? What is the right way to understand the relationship between art and life, beauty and politics anyway? These are important questions, and it is surprising that Margaret has apparently not thought seriously about them before. Her naïveté is its own form of resistance, a willed obtuseness in which for too long Margaret takes both refuge and pride.

It is unclear whether Katherine Ashenburg is ironizing her main character or offering her up as a stand-in for all those today who, with similar thoughtlessness, rail against the "imposition" of politics onto art they admire or enjoy—an attitude the novel effectively shows to be facile and unsustainable. But Margaret reads like someone we are meant to take at face value and whose re-education is meant to carry both drama and moral weight, a project that falters, partly because Margaret—a trained expert—should know better and also because her musings are more banal than revelatory. When she looks at a photograph of Fanny, for example, we are told: "No matter how many times she read or heard or watched stories about the Holocaust, something in Margaret found it impossible to make sense of the undeniable facts. That this smiling woman had been brutally snuffed out seemed incomprehensible." Margaret is clearly the one most directly responsible for the leaden cliché, but her credulousness, though gradually corrected, is presented sympathetically rather than critically. Ashenburg's prose gives no sense

that her protagonist is falling short of a capacity for nuance or insight—linguistic, aesthetic, ethical—that the novel itself exemplifies.

An interconnected storyline concerning Margaret's identity is similarly awkward. She has long avoided confronting the suggestion that her recently deceased father was Jewish—but why, she wonders. "Her aversion stemmed from her father's," she rationalizes. "If he didn't want to talk about it, who was she to barge in?" The obvious explanation for her reluctance to face her own heritage is internalized antisemitism. This uncomfortable possibility is left implied as Margaret instead moves—partly through her newly heightened sensitivity to the horrors of the Holocaust—toward reconciliation with her father's relatives and a romanticized vision of a "many-coloured" history that "now turned out to be an intimate part of who she was."

Margaret's New Look is well conceived and well constructed. The clues that arrive at the museum set up a mystery plot with a solution that neatly ties the book's different strands together. But the payoff seems scant, the whole scheme an elaborate device to drag Margaret into a more honest understanding of both Dior and herself. How much does she really learn? It's hard to tell, but, by the end, she has another project in mind: an edition of Fanny Berger's diary. Perhaps this is just her next enthusiasm, or perhaps the jacket she wears at the exhibition's gala opening, a reworked version of one of Dior's designs, indicates a transformation that is substantive as well as stylistic. ▲

Bit by Bit

Cliffhangers from Heather O'Neill and Marcus Kliewer

Aaron Obedkoff

Valentine in Montreal

Heather O'Neill

HarperCollins

224 pages, hardcover, ebook, and audiobook

We Used to Live Here

Marcus Kliewer

Atria/Emily Bestler Books

320 pages, hardcover, softcover, ebook, and audiobook

THINK OF ANY MAJOR NOVEL FROM THE nineteenth century and there's a decent chance it first appeared as a serial in a newspaper or magazine. But by the end of the twentieth century, radio and television — along with the increased affordability of paperbacks — had made the widely popular form all but obsolete.

Then, in the spring of 2023, the editor-in-chief of the *Montreal Gazette*, Bert Archer, asked Heather O'Neill if she wanted to develop a serialized story in the paper's pages. "I thought it was a terrible idea," she recalls, "one that might drive me mad, but I said yes immediately." The result, originally titled *Mystery in the Métro*, ran every Saturday from May to December, alongside illustrations by the novelist's daughter, Arizona O'Neill. The thirty chapters have now been gathered, with no editorial changes, into *Valentine in Montreal*.

O'Neill hails the Victorian serial, particularly the work of Charles Dickens, as an influence on her project: "He brought readers scenes from the underclasses, giving them the dignity of the rich." The imprint of Dickens is captured in the childhood of O'Neill's protagonist. Orphaned as a baby, Valentine was raised by her grandmother, a hoarder "of all things made of paper," who forbade her to venture outside. We meet twenty-year-old Valentine shortly after her guardian's death. She lives alone in a tiny apartment within a towering high-rise and works at a subterranean *depanneur* inside one of the city's busiest metro stations, Berri-UQAM. Although she has never travelled beyond the city limits, she finds freedom in the metro system, which she rides as both a hobby and a ritual. Each of the chapters focuses on one of the network's stations.

What Valentine lacks in worldly experience she more than makes up for in curiosity and imagination. Despite her reclusive childhood, she maintains an enchanted relationship with the world around her. As she explains to one of her colleagues, "I think that because I am underneath people's feet underground all day, it makes me part of their subconscious. I am making up all the dreams people will have at night." Feeling a duty to craft "pleasant dreams,"



Who knows where this romp will take readers next.

she envisions a train full of cats dressed as commuters and belugas swimming outside the windows. At the same time, Valentine has clear-eyed, almost anthropological insight into her surroundings. "When a girl weeps on the métro, everyone pretends not to see it," she observes. "This is because there are very few places where a girl can cry without everyone around her asking why she thinks she has the right to feel that way." Although she struggles to regard the "pensées" she jots down as art, Valentine nonetheless heeds the advice of another Victorian writer, Henry James, to "try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost."

During one of her shifts, Valentine spots her doppelgänger and follows her onto the street. She soon learns that her look-alike, Yelena, is a celebrated ballerina and, much to her surprise, her second cousin. To further complicate matters, Yelena has racked up serious gambling debts, which, because of the uncanny resemblance of the two women, Valentine quickly gets roped into helping her settle. The ensuing escapade — complete with Russian mobsters, a cricket that plays Eastern European folk music, and romantic intrigue — takes the young cashier far beyond what she could have imagined.

O'Neill's deep familiarity with the quirks of Montreal life is evident on every page, as she documents the endless construction on city streets, the punishing rush of arctic wind through swinging station doors, and the "seedy-looking" mannequins posed in shop windows along Plaza St-Hubert. Narrated by Valentine in

the present tense, it is a riveting and fantastical tale, made all the more charming by her strange and surreal perspective.

Evidence of the book's origins as a feature in the *Gazette* can be found throughout. Each chapter is roughly the same length, giving the story a rhythmic quality that is driven forward by a propulsive plot. Character descriptions and biographies are sometimes repeated, ostensibly for the sake of those who are joining midway through its run. The author of a serial must also strive to maintain the reader's interest — lest she lose them from one instalment to the next — and O'Neill does so with many gripping cliffhangers and surreal detours. "I had to have a world that was fun to be in," she explains. "I could not go back and change anything, as a writer usually does in a novel. Once a donkey danced into the book, there was no way to tell it to go." While *Valentine in Montreal* bears signs of these formal constraints and oddities, it seldom feels gimmicky or contrived.

MARCUS KLIEWER'S SERIAL NOVEL, *WE USED TO LIVE Here*, developed organically. It began when the author, an illustrator from Vancouver, joined Reddit in 2020 and started posting excerpts of his fiction. He found success on r/nosleep, a subreddit dedicated to horror writing with over eighteen million followers. Kliewer's second contribution to the forum, the four-part "We Used to Live Here," was an instant hit: "OH MY GOODNESS. So creepy!" said one user in response to the opening part. "This whole

story makes me feel dreadful in the best way," wrote another about the conclusion. It was later voted the community's "Scariest Story of 2021." The waves it made online earned Kliewer both a three-book contract and a movie deal with Netflix.

Significantly expanded from the original version, *We Used to Live Here* follows Eve and Charlie, a queer couple who have recently relocated to the backcountry of Oregon to flip houses. Their recent acquisition, 3709 Heritage Lane, is dilapidated and isolated, and it has an all too spacious attic and basement. One early winter evening, Eve hears a knock on the door while she is home alone. She answers to find a family of five on the doorstep. The father, Thomas Faust — whose name alludes to deals brokered with the devil — explains that he grew up there and would like to give his children a tour. Eve, sensing something is amiss, resists at first. However, her "crippling fear of disappointing anyone, even complete strangers," wins out, and she lets them inside.

Following a few eerie exchanges, Eve begins to grow suspicious. Although "the distant alarm bells of her subconscious rang out," her fear goes unnoticed by the more gregarious Charlie, who returns in time to invite the family to stay for dinner and, after a sudden snowstorm closes the nearby bridge, for the night. When Eve awakes the next morning to discover Charlie gone and her own phone missing, she treks out to enlist the help of a neighbour, Heather. Over a cup of tea, Eve learns Thomas's family adopted a runaway during his childhood. Heather tells her that, after a short time with the family, the troubled girl began to develop the delusional belief that "the house was changing, people were changing" — a paranoia that led her to stab eight-year-old Thomas with a fountain pen thirty-seven times. The strange and unnerving situation continues to escalate. Eve, fearing that she, too, is going mad, winds up at a mental institution, fighting the revelation that she may have been Thomas's sister all along.

Kliewer draws on many tropes of the horror genre: menacing children's toys, sinister motels, loss of control, and macabre hospital scenes. With an eye for unsettling details, he captures grotesque sights, sounds, and smells, like "the maggoty stench of decay." Kliewer inserts ominous material between chapters: police reports, real estate records, and medical articles. One entry describes tattoo removal: "Even after years of treatment, a faint imprint is often visible." It is not always obvious how these documents pertain to the plot at hand, but they intensify the overall tone of dread.

The withholding nature of serialization is especially apt for a work of horror like *We Used to Live Here*. The sense of suspense, suspicion, and fear of the unknown comes to be shared by the characters and the readers alike. At the same time, Kliewer has used the resources of his medium to foster a relationship with his audience. As he wrote, he hosted live question and answer sessions on Reddit and encouraged fans to "keep an eye out for connections" — a sensible tip considering the many hidden links woven throughout the story. While contemporary readers may no longer start "rioting because they wanted the next installment," as O'Neill writes of Dickens's work, they may still find ways to plead with — and influence — writers in mid-process. ▲



TRADING FATE
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GRAEME MENZIES

HIDDEN FLOWERS
KEIKO HONDA

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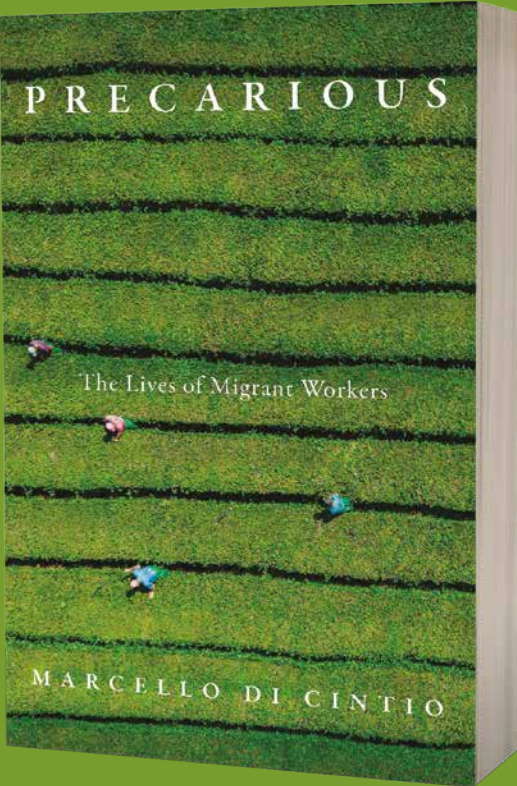
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Full Circle

MIDWAY THROUGH MY MASTER'S degree, I found myself sunk in a sofa, listening to one of those arguments you encounter mostly at grad school parties: that you did not need to read a book to have — well, read the book. A classmate had mounted this claim after it became apparent that his criticism of a seminal text came from its general shape rather than readerly observation. The novel was bad, he said. Derivative and unconvincing. He didn't even need to open it to know that. "It's like travel," he insisted. "You don't have to go somewhere if you know what's there. I don't have to go to Greece to have been to Greece." At which point the woman beside me — our host — turned toward me, a faraway look in her eyes, and murmured, "I'm in Greece right now."

To tell about those nights is hard, for I was very inebriated and very sad, newly bereft of the mentor whose sins would place him, generously, in the second circle of Dante's hell, more shrewdly in the eighth or ninth. But despite claims to the contrary, I had never read *Inferno*, and now such dubious intellectualism worked just fine for me, unmoored as I was. My pontificating peer confirmed that I did not need to: after all, I was already in hell. I was, more accurately, in Houston, a strange land to which I'd ferried the copy of Robert Pinsky's translation that I'd been carrying around for years, extracting lines to plunk into poems that needed...what, exactly? Classmates and professors praised the "intertextuality"; a journal accepted one of these forgeries from the first submission I ever sent out. I was twenty then, and I was on my way, riding a charmed trajectory toward poetry fame — until I was merely drunk and lost in a graduate program far too advanced for the likes of me, rubbing elbows with doctoral candidates and pretending I had previously encountered the phrase "accentual-syllabic."

What to do but double down on the grift and announce that Dante's *Inferno* would be the backbone of my thesis, an idea that had come to me — full disclosure — in the form of auditory hallucination. While sweating at a red light on

my way into campus one morning, I'd heard the voice of Virgil explain I was destined to write a contemporary version. This made terrific sense to me, until I started reading my source text. What, I despaired, two pages in, was a Mantuan? The year was 2002, and my free AOL trial strained beneath the weight of my ignorance. (I did not realize there was back matter.) I gave up.

Finally reading *Inferno* this summer, nearly a Keats's lifetime later, I was curious to see how wrong I'd gotten my allusions. It was strange to encounter lines I already knew by heart, like bumping into an old friend in the wrong city, a place where you'd have expected a different population of lost souls. And, like trying to catch up with one of those spectres, it was boring. Things that one might wish would behave as metaphor resist its legerdemain, the historical details of Dante's casting being all but impossible to overlook. If my early poems worked, they worked despite the fact I hadn't thought about them very hard, drawn instead by the drama of the sinners' lives, the power of Pinsky's language.

So instead of the tortured academic study I'd envisioned, I decided to ignore the paths that led to digression. Biographical context? Who needs it when you have a map (front matter!) and the willingness to see where it will take you. Liberated, I was back where I'd started, reading for pleasure, for story, for the love of a well-made line — minus the need to look smarter than I am. What I could not glean from the page I ignored. What's left in *Inferno*, read this way? A story of real friendship, I'm tempted to say. Virgil is a good teacher — the kind of guide I could have used as I tried to find my way back to the living. He is invested in Dante's success but with no thought of what he'll get from his student; he seeks neither flattery nor indulgence. One is also left with, yes, the general shape — in this case, the literal shape of suffering. Circles within circles. Like the wounded mind, spiraling unbidden along its fractured neural pathways, the damned complete their tortured circuits only to begin again. For Dante, hell is repetition. And for the faithful traveller, the only way out is through. ▲

Vanessa Stauffer is a writer, editor, and book designer in Windsor, Ontario.

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