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A National Review

September 1994 \$3.25

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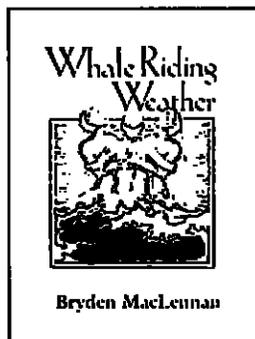
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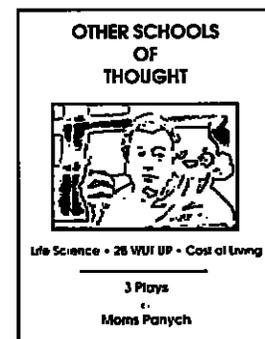
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#### The Bittersweet Man

After walking away from a critically acclaimed but commercially ignored debut, **GEORGE ELLIOTT** has returned with more wonderful and iconoclastic stories

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Plus: an excerpt from Elliott's new collection of short fiction



#### Behind the Best-Seller List

The inside story on why some books make it and some books don't  
**BY STEPHEN HENIGHAN**



#### Celebrating Difference

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#### Sexual Positions

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**BY LYNN CROSBIE**



## Reviews

A comprehensive look at three new literary biographies, two travel anthologies and many more books  
**BEGINNING ON PAGE 35**

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# Contributors

**Julie Adam** is a Toronto writer and editor. **Pat Barclay** is a frequent contributor to these pages; she lives on Salt Spring Island, B.C. **Dennison Berwick** is a Toronto journalist and the author of *Savages: The Life and Killing of the Yanomami* (Macfarlane Walter & Ross). **John Charles** is an Edmonton writer. **Lynn Crosbie** is the editor of *The Girl Wants To* (Coach House), an anthology of erotic writing by women; her latest book of poetry is *VillainElle*



Lynn Crosbie

(Coach House). **Cyril Dabydeen** is an Ottawa writer whose latest novel, *Sometimes Hard*, is forthcoming from Longman in the UK. **Charlene Diehl-Jones** teaches in the department of English at St. Jerome's College in Waterloo, Ont. **Scott Ellis** is a Winnipeg writer and editor.



Cyril Dabydeen

**Brian Fawcett's** most recent book is *Gender Wars* (Somerville House). **Maureen McCallum Garvie** is a freelance writer who lives in Kingston, Ont. **Ann Giardini** is a writer living in Kamloops, B.C. **Joan Givner's** latest book is *The Self-Portrait of a Literary Biographer* (University of Georgia). **Sheryl Halpern** is a Montreal writer.



Stephen Henighan

**Stephen Henighan** is currently attending Oxford University; his latest book is *Nights in the Yungas* (ThistleDown), a collection of short fiction. **Mary Frances Hill** is a Vancouver writer. **David Homel** is a Montreal writer and translator; *Rat Palms* (HarperCollins) is his latest book, and a new novel, set in Russia, is scheduled for publication by HarperCollins next spring.



David Homel

**George Kaufman** is a writer living in Oshawa, Ont. **Janice Kulyk Keefer's** most recent book is *Rest Harrow* (Random House). **Alec McEwen** is a professor of surveying engineering at the University of Calgary. **Janet McNaughton's** *Catch Me Once, Catch Me Twice* (Creative) is reviewed on page 58. **David Prosser** is the managing editor of the Stratford Festival's publications. **John Reeves** is a Toronto photographer. **Diane Schoemperlen's** *The Language of Love* is forthcoming from HarperCollins. **Patricia**



David Prosser

**Seaman** is a Toronto writer and illustrator; her latest book, *The Black Diamond Ring* (Mercury), will appear next month. **Fred Sharpe** is a Toronto puzzle enthusiast. **Robert M. Stamp** is an antiquarian bookseller and a former member of the Royal Canadian Air Cadets. **Glenn Sumi** is a Toronto writer and editor. **Eva Tihanyi** is a writer living in Peterborough, Ont. **Rhea Tregebov's** new collection of poetry, *Mapping the Chaos*, is forthcoming from Véhicule. ○

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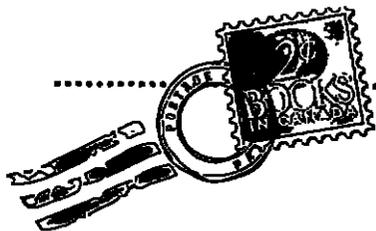
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THE ASSISTANCE OF THE GOVERNMENT OF ONTARIO  
THROUGH THE MINISTRY OF CULTURE,  
TOURISM AND RECREATION IS ACKNOWLEDGED



## Letters

### Branden Ironies

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN THE comment of a non-author subscriber, I offer the following on the article by Victoria Branden, "No Sex, Please. We're Gents" (Summer).

After struggling to appreciate the literary offerings of some of our well-known Canadian authors who seem to feel the necessity of using a lot of barnyard nouns and adjectives, I found Branden's essay to be a breath of fresh air.

It has been a source of wonder to me for years why the dirty language and denigration of women in novels is thought to be a necessary feature of literature in Canada. I wonder too if the inclusion of this dirty and salacious stuff in Canadian writing is the reason that it doesn't sell very well abroad.

William J. Robertson  
South Ste. Marie, Ont.

DON'T KNOW WHICH I FOUND funnier – Victoria Branden's genial iconoclasm, or the humourless fury of her critics. Surely there's no law requiring all of us to admire the same hallowed names? I too feel that many literary celebrities have been overpraised, and that it's unhealthy for all concerned if any names are beyond criticism. I greatly admire Margaret Atwood, but I agree that *Cat's Eye* was far below her usual standard. I'd read it all before in *Lady Oracle*, where it was funny, and was baffled at finding it all reworked, humourlessly, in the later book. Perhaps she had to get it out of her system. No one hits the bull's eye every time, and we must allow all artists a few misses, but I think it's wrong for reviewers to insist that every word by their favourites is sacred and beyond crit-

icism. I would be interested in Ms. Branden's view of *The Robber Bride*, which I consider easily Atwood's best.

The most (unintentionally) amusing contribution was that of Gordon Phinn, who believes his generation is the first to discover sex. I wonder what Ms. Atwood would feel at being relegated to a generation for whom "the sex drive was denied and the orgasm constituted a virtual mystery." Dear Mr. Phinn, I come from a generation which long antedates that of Ms. Atwood, and I can assure you that we were acutely aware of the sex drive. We couldn't indulge it as we might have liked, because of the danger of pregnancy. The pleasure of the orgasm was no mystery but a constant temptation that led many of us to take risks, hence the frequency of "shotgun weddings."

And we weren't so hard up for excitement that we needed corpses or Siamese twins to "turn us on," as Barbara Gowdy's characters (and readers) apparently do!

Felicity Irwin  
Burlington, Ont.

PASSION IS AN ACCEPTABLE, nay desirable, element of opinion articles: it brings the reader into the story, makes the reader passionate him- or herself. But there's a line, and Victoria Branden's transparent feminism took her one toe over.

Ms. Branden might have had an article there ("No Sex, Please. We're Gents") if she hadn't brought out a hobby-horse Mordecai Richler – for a switching.

Did she forget that the premise of her argument was that men aren't writing about sex any more? She blew any credibility the interesting topic could have had by bitching about a man who does

just that. It's not that Branden brought up Richler as a sample of how men used to write – that would have worked. She just got herself worked into a passionate tizzy and couldn't let go. I have to wonder if she just saw the chance to repeat his vulva-oriented verbiage, and took it.

Shame on your editors for letting that wayward diatribe find its way into your piece. Or who's editing whom over there?

John Tyler  
Tokyo, Japan

### Take a Hike

FOR SOME TIME NOW I HAVE been trying to formulate a reply to Ed Hawco's letter, "The Culture of Nature" (Summer), about my book, *The Perfection of the Morning: An Apprenticeship in Nature*. I was puzzled at first, racking my brain, trying to find some place inside my head where Ed's argument fit something I knew. I worried over it because I knew his argument was one only intellectuals would use and occasionally their arguments have a grain of truth in them, sometimes one suspects they are even brilliant, if one could only understand them. But, sadly, no bells rang, no light pierced the darkness, and all I felt was a growing exasperation.

This argument is so smug, so élitist. The whole point of the book was to say that nature is not some intellectual construct, neither wholly unknowable, as Ed is saying, nor unavailable, that nature is under the front deck and in bed with you and in the ditches along the highway. As long as people believe that nature is to be found only on the top of a mountain in Tibet or at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, then it becomes available only to the leisured classes, to the wealthy, to

those with Ed's education, who are the only ones who can understand what it is and where to find it, the only ones able to recognize it. By Ed's argument, farmers and ranchers (who have spent their entire lives out in it) don't know a thing about it, and thus urban people are spared the ignominy of mere country people knowing more than they do about so vital a subject.

They are also spared having to get up off their bums to get acquainted with it. I can only repeat my advice: Ed, go for a walk!

Sharon Butala  
Eastend, Sask.

## Misplaced Credulity

JOEL YANOFSKY, ALAS, IS entitled to his opinions about Brian Fawcett's *Gender Wars*, lamentable and ill-conceived as those opinions are ("A Guide to the Perplexed," Summer). But to casually say, as he does, at the end of his review — as though it were an indisputable truism — "If the novel ain't broke, at least not yet, why does Fawcett insist on fixing it?" is really to go beyond the pale.

Where has Yanofsky been for the last half-century while the rest of us have been arguing about genre? Has he never heard of "modernism," "postmodernism," and the like? What in the world does Yanofsky think that Naipaul, Kundera, Calvino, Ondaatje, and, yes, Fawcett, have been up to if not responding to the plight of the novel? Hopefully, other readers will share my sense of Yanofsky's misplaced credulity about the novel and judge the rest of his opinions about Fawcett's new "novel" accordingly. Yanofsky's is the sort of reviewing that gets *Books in Canada* unfairly labelled as provincial and bush-league.

Stan Persky  
Vancouver

JOEL YANOFSKY'S IDEA THAT by singing "Champ" instead of "Tramp" Frank Sinatra has been "sensitized" doesn't indicate much understanding of Sinatra or of Larry Hart's great lyrics for "The Lady Is a Tramp." Sinatra likes varying repeated words simply for the fun of it. And the song was originally in the first person, so "she" was "I," as proudly proclaimed by Mitzi Green in Rodgers and Hart's 1937 Broadway hit *Babes in Arms*. (Along with Frank it's Ella who has made the song indelible, and of course she sings "I" as well.)

The song is one of several wry, satirical takes on New York's café society by Hart, and the Lady distinguishes herself from them by *not* "going to Harlem in ermine and pearls." She doesn't "dish the dirt with the rest of the girls," "likes the theatre but never comes late," "loves the opera and stays wide awake." In other words she's got a healthy, zesty sense of life unlike all the phoney wealthy poseurs, and that's why they label her a "tramp." Change the word to "champ" and the song loses its point, becoming smug and self-congratulatory.

While we're talking musicals, why didn't someone edit Brian Fawcett's preening, entirely gratuitous nine-line remark about *Showboat* in his review of Mavor Moore's *Reinventing Myself*? Does *Books in Canada* really accept this self-proclaimed guru on his own terms as needing to spout every inane opinion that pops into his head?

John Charles  
Edmonton, Alta.

## Integrate the Canon

IN HIS MAY COLUMN ("A BITTER Exile"). Douglas Fetherling points out that "escaped-slave narratives .... though

they frequently deal with Canada, are a fertile field for scholarship in the United States but seldom studied here." Perhaps racism lurks behind the disregard shown this branch of Canadian literature. In a country that has never come to terms with its heritage of slavery, it's no surprise that works like Samuel Ringgold Ward's *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro* (1855), which attacks Canadian racism, are little known. Likewise, though white Loyalist writers like Jacob Bailey are accepted members of the Canadian literary canon, Black Loyalist writers like John Marrant remain obscure. Yet, to appreciate our literary heritage fully, we must include the contributions of our early Black writers. For instance, while we know that Thomas Chandler Haliburton, Canada's most famous writer of the 19th century, defended slavery shamelessly, we should also know that Ward trounces him in his book. It's time to integrate the canon.

George Elliott Clarke  
Ottawa

## More Native Writers

"THE NATIVE WRITERS OF Canada" was a feature I welcomed when I received my Summer issue of *Books in Canada*. I liked the photographs and was pleased that a number of Native writers were introduced to us. Two Native writers need little introduction to us Nova Scotians since thousands of their books have been sold over the past two years. And these writers, Isabelle Knockwood and Daniel Paul, didn't make it — not even when those not photographed were listed (17). Is it possible that Thomas King and Greg Staats had not heard of them? If they had asked Rita Joe, who was featured, she could have told them what an important contribution these two Shubenacadie writers have made to Mi'kmaw experience. In fact, Rita Joe

was one of the contributors to Isabelle Knockwood's book, *Out of the Depths: The Experiences of Mi'kmaq Children in the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia* (Roseway Publishing). Daniel Paul's book *We Were Not the Savages* (Nimbus) has been on the best-seller list since it was published last year.

Native literature and peoples have been neglected long enough that a more comprehensive article would not be excessive. The photographs were good — now, how about a feature article?

*Kathleen Tudor  
Roseway Publishing  
Lockeport, N.S.*

### We Should Look It Up

ANNE DENOON, IN HER PROFILE of Joyce Marshall ("A Private Place." Summer), makes passing reference to a *New York Times* review of Marshall's novel *Lovers and Strangers* "by one Walter O'Hearn (a Canadian, Marshall tells me) ...."

The late Walter O'Hearn was managing editor of the (also late) *Montreal Star* when the novel was published.

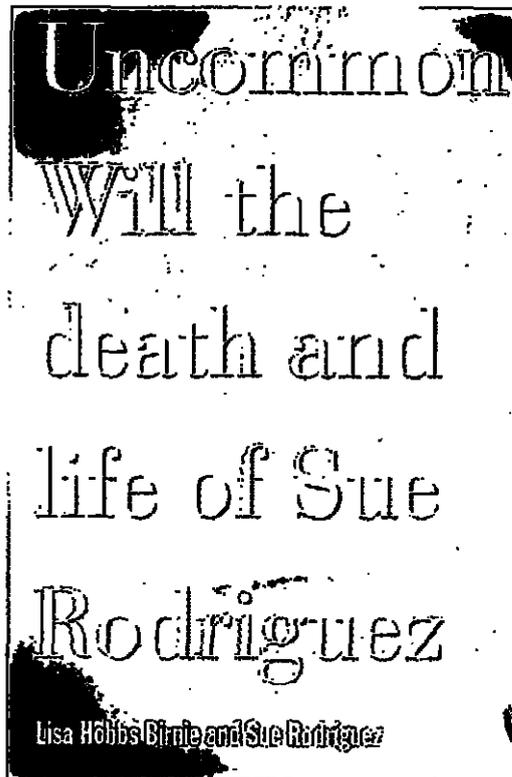
While tracking down O'Hearn's identity may have been beyond Denoon's time, resources, or interest, the editors of *BiC* could surely have checked it out. He deserves to be identified as something more than "one Walter O'Hearn."

*Richard Purser  
Calgary*

### Moore, Not Less

I THANK BRIAN FAWCETT FOR his generous if elliptical take on my *Reinventing Myself* ("A Life in the Arts." Summer), but what's all this about my being in "semi-retirement on the West Coast"? One may expect such slander from Torontonians who assume that any-

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one moving to British Columbia has quit working, but not from Vancouver's own enlightened and industrious Fawcett. In addition to teaching at the University of Victoria, I write plays, books, and articles, appear in films and on television and radio, and lecture all over the place. I'm thinking seriously of semi-retiring in the year 2000.

*Mavor Moore  
Victoria*

## Training, Not Ritual

I WAS DISAPPOINTED BY Glenn Sumi's flippant tone in his review of Claudia Gahlinger's *Woman in the Rock* ("But Is It Art?" April). Sure, we live in a tabloid society, but Sumi's breezy categorization of the book as particularly timely in such an era denies the depth and political importance of Gahlinger's work. Instead of naming ritual abuse as such, Sumi tells us, glibly, that a character's mother "permits various townfolk to further abuse her each Saturday night."

He acknowledges Gahlinger's poetic and evocative prose but dismisses her witty and culturally rich fishing stories, wondering what they're meant to do. A bit of Ontario-blindness, perhaps? Not understanding why a reader would be drawn to a feminist story about *fishing*? He says Gahlinger's story of incest memory and recovery is worth telling, but criticizes the healing rituals described in the book as "New Age flim-flam," and, in one case, mistakes what was actually an employment training program for a healing ritual.

Surely Sumi realizes that no writer could tell a story such as this one without exploring and developing means of healing. In my view, a writer such as Gahlinger produces a stronger book, ethically and literarily, when she shares the healing, as well as the pain, with her

readers. In short, I think Gahlinger deserved more respect than she was given in this review.

*Sue MacLeod  
Halifax*

WHILE MULTIPLE CONFUSIONS are contained in Glenn Sumi's critique of my book, *Woman in the Rock*, there is one error that my pride as a Maritimer, a woman, and a usually poor person cannot let pass without comment.

I wrote the two "Fire House" stories in *Woman in the Rock* after completing the firefighting segment of a Nova Scotia Nautical Institute deckhand training course funded by Canada Employment (I badly needed a job). They are clearly not about some New Age-type pay-\$1,000-to-set-yourself-on-fire ritual. Sumi is the only reader I know who has interpreted these stories (popular ones at readings, incidentally) as such. This, along with other criticisms that suggest a less than cursory reading of the book, leaves me puzzled and saddened.

*Claudia Gahlinger  
Halifax*

## Who They?

MICHAEL COREN'S REMARKS in your Summer issue about writers and politics have left me scratching my head. "When the Montreal intellectuals and the Toronto activists thought that Bolshevism might be nice," he writes, "they signed a document metaphorically in favour of mass murder, social engineering, death camps, and crass imperialism." Who were these people, and what was the document they signed? Unless Mr. Coren is exercised over the activities of a tiny handful of Canadian Communist intellectuals it is utterly unclear what he may be talking about.

*Michiel Horn  
Toronto*

Michael Coren replies: *Well, metaphors are difficult old things, aren't they, and I suppose that if taken literally they can be "utterly unclear." Let me be "utterly" explicit. Those Canadians who signed their names to membership of the Communist Party and its support groups even after people like Malcolm Muggeridge had revealed the Soviets' massacre of millions in the 1920s, even after the non-aggression pact with the Nazis in the 1930s, and even after the invasion of Hungary in the 1950s, gave their support to a manifesto of pure, palpable evil. If Mr. Horn [a history professor] thinks they were a "tiny handful," I must only hope that he never writes a history of modern Canada.*

## Brick Basics

I WAS HAPPY TO SEE BRICK Books get some recognition in Douglas Fetherling's article on literary activity outside Toronto ("Is There Life after Toronto?" May), but two impressions left by his article need to be corrected. For one thing, I'm no longer with Brick Books. I'm going into my second year as poetry editor for McClelland & Stewart. For another, when I was with Brick Books it was as a member of a publishing collective. The other members are Don McKay, Marnie Parsons, Jan Zwicky, Sheila Deane, Gary Draper, Kitty Lewis, and Sue Schenk. I'm flattered that Douglas Fetherling thinks I could singlehandedly accomplish what this wonderful group has accomplished together, but it isn't possible and it isn't so.

*Stan Dragland  
Toronto*

*Letters may be edited for length or to delete potentially libellous statements. Except in extraordinary circumstances, letters of more than 500 words will not be accepted for publication.*

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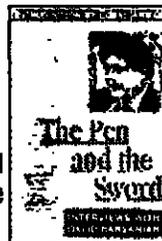
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# The Bittersweet Man

*After walking away from a critically acclaimed but commercially ignored debut, George Elliott has returned with more wonderful and iconoclastic stories*

**I**N 1962, A SMALL VOLUME OF LINKED SHORT STORIES CAME out and bowled over the few literary critics who were awake at the time. The book was called *The kissing man* and the author, someone unknown to the literary set, was named George Elliott. *The kissing man* proceeded to go through four printings and an American edition, garnering critical acclaim in academic circles along the way.

see the appeal of something difficult like writing. Something you can fail at, that you can keep persevering at till you get it right, even if it takes a lifetime.

What happened next to this promising, up-and-coming Canadian fiction writer? Something very unusual in this noisy age of ours: silence.

Not self-conscious silence. Not the silence of writer's block or depression, or any of those other reasons writers may have for not writing. Elliott was simply otherwise occupied. Very occupied, as it turned out, leading a life many of us would envy, and in the process walking away from one professional success after another.

Now, 32 years after *The kissing man*, Elliott is back with a new story collection, *The bittersweet man* (bittersweet, by the way, is a climbing or trailing plant with scarlet berries). Not that he was ever really away. Since that first success, Elliott has been writing constantly: short stories, plays, novels, essays. In fact, on his c.v., among the various positions of responsibility he has held in diplomatic, political, and commercial life since the end of the 1940s, there is one notation that's either mischievous, self-denigrating, or devastatingly clear-sighted (or all three): "Author of dozens of rejected manuscripts and plays."

For someone who has led such a full and rewarding life in a variety of endeavours, you can

George Elliott has done many different things brilliantly, and writing is the one challenge that refuses to be conquered.

GEORGE ELLIOTT WAS BORN 71 YEARS ago in London, Ontario, in a landscape whose place names recall Great Britain: Essex, Oxford, Middlesex, Kent. He was at university when the Second World War broke out and, Elliott recalls, "You had to get an A or a B to stay in school at a nonessential course, and I got a C. So I had to report to National Selective Service." Since he had weak eyes, he was assigned to the editorship of a country weekly in Strathroy, Ontario. He had edited the *Varsity* at the University of Toronto, but the business of getting immersed in the affairs of a rural township fascinated him — "though it did get irreverent from time to time, with headlines like 'Rams Important in Sheep-Raising.'" Elliott found himself in hot water, he remembers, when he took up the cause of the local bootlegger, who was a horse enthusiast and didn't like the condition of the Strathroy pony track.

Strathroy was a town of about 3,000 at the time, of it, Elliott says. "I fear it has blended into



JOHN REEVES

London, though I haven't been back there for years." Blended in or not, the locality has been immortalized as the setting for *The kissing man*. That collection, which he "scribbled down" in nine or 10 months, is remarkable for its surreal imagery, quiet wisdom, social awareness, and total lack of those convenient enlightenments at the end of short stories the critics call "epiphanies." "The neat little closures are technically fun to do, but I don't find life epiphanic. I remember telling myself over and over again, *Nothing resolves, nothing resolves*. This is an unresolved book, though there is truth to it."

The stories, taken together, form a sharp-edged portrait of a small town. Two orphaned brothers take up residence in the carriage house behind the town hotel. One character takes down

and smashes the crystal chandelier, piece by piece, while another tries to figure out his relation to the land he farms. One story begins, "The man who lived out loud didn't last very long." Then there is "the kissing man" himself, a male spirit who offers fleeting moments of tenderness to the women of the town. Though you never see him, you know he is there by his effect — a model for the writer, and for Elliott's combination of strength and discretion.

How did the Canadian public react to *The kissing man*? The book got juicy reviews — though CanLit was a much sparser landscape at the time — and the academics cottoned on to it. Elliott recalls journeying to Glendon College at York University to visit the sherry-drinkers (as he calls them) and discuss

his work. But all in all, he felt a complete absence of reaction, as if he had served his ball the best he could from his basement apartment in the Toronto suburb of Leaside (where he was living at the time), but the ball was never returned. The book disappeared into what Elliott characterizes as a void. The only time he felt in a real relationship with a reader was when Margaret Avison, who acted as editor for the book, sent back her corrections and queries. Meanwhile, John Gray and Kildare Dobbs, who signed up the book for Macmillan, seemed to see nothing out of the ordinary. And, indeed, despite the brief new life given *The kissing man* in 1984 by General Publishing's New Press paperback series, this wonderful book is out of print. *Plus ça change* in the Canadian literary world.

# What are you doing with your spare time?

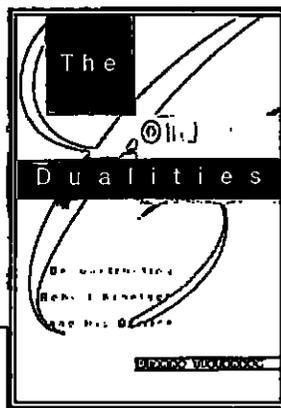
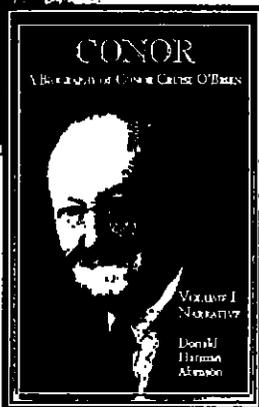
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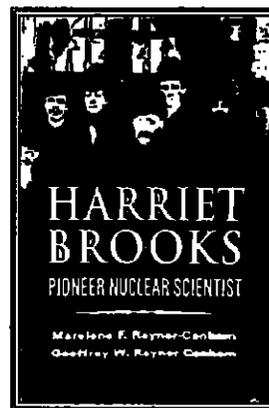
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SO GEORGE ELLIOTT WALKED away from publishing — though not from writing. "It just didn't supply the thrill of having your ass on the line, the way advertising did," he explains. Besides, Elliott admits, he was never driven to write or inhabited by the burning desire to tell his stories.

"I don't burn," he states flatly, owning up to a lack of the primal urge to outdo Scott Fitzgerald. In fact, when he finished the manuscript that was to become *The kissing man*, he sealed it in an envelope and placed it in his drawer, and it was only when he saw a manuscript he knew was worse than his, written by a colleague, that he offered his for sale. "I didn't know anything about the book publishing business," he recalls. "I thought if the manuscript was that great, then someone would appear and show an interest. No one ever did that; [after *The kissing man*] there was no follow-up.

And then I got to know the economics of starving to death, with three kids."

In Toronto, he continued to work for MacLaren Advertising, where he had been when he wrote *The kissing man*, and was instrumental in developing television advertising. "MacLaren became number one because of television," he recalls, "and we accumulated a lot of self-confidence in an area that terrified the clients." His approach, to say the least, was fearless, especially regarding the Americans, about whom he had absolutely no inferiority complex. "I guess I was born unafraid. Besides, the 1960s were stunningly easy in Toronto. You didn't have to think; you just had to shave every morning and wear a suit and make money." He went through a period of feeling lost, occupying "the cutting edge of a very trivial world," and living the life: a bottle of scotch a day, a marriage break-up, trips to the city dump in the middle of

the night to shoot rats. He conjures up the ghost and the sad lesson of Scott Fitzgerald as a way of describing that period: "I chose to be lost" is how he puts it.

IN 1965, HE WAS INVITED TO lunch with George Sinclair and Walter Gordon at the King Edward Hotel in Toronto, so that Gordon could get a look at him. Gordon must have liked what he saw, for Elliott went on to take over the Liberal Party account at MacLaren Advertising. He worked with Lester Pearson, then Trudeau, and left MacLaren in 1972 to become a senior adviser in the prime minister's office. Elliott's attitude toward politics echoes his feelings about advertising: "Politics consists of taking trivial things very seriously for a very long time," and he has harsh words for Trudeau's arrogance and the "head down, elbows out," unenlightened stubbornness of politicians like



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Allan MacEachern and Lloyd Axworthy. (As for Chrétien, Elliott the former insider says, "He has all the ego of Trudeau and all the intellectual vanity of Jimmy Carter — but he doesn't show either." Apparently, this concealment earns our current prime minister points in Elliott's eyes.)

No wonder, then, that Elliott didn't choose a career in politics. "I stayed out of public view, and I avoided TV appearances. I wasn't a good guest. On a late-night show with Barbara Frum one time, she asked me what advice I would offer Bill Davis [then premier of Ontario]. I said I'd advise him to lose weight. That wasn't the kind of answer they were looking for!" Elliott enjoys his own iconoclasm, and he has come by it honestly, understanding that only those above the fray can attain that splendid lack of self-interest that makes for the true iconoclast.

TRUDEAU WON A MAJORITY BY two seats in the 1972 election tantamount to a loss in Elliott's eyes — and so Elliott was clearly ready for another walk. He left the PMO and travelled through Europe, partly for MacLaren, his former employer, and partly for his own pleasure, until the gods smiled upon him again. He was handed a job at the Canadian embassy in Washington, in charge of media relations, cultural affairs, and academic relations. "I spent six years there, and it was a lark," Elliott laughs. "I had a handsome apartment, a Colombian cook, and no expectations."

Meanwhile, he continued to write, producing plays and novels, mostly of the thriller variety. "The plays were awful; the characters were undifferentiated and interchangeable. With the thrillers, I faked too much, and that gave a thinness of tone. All in all, I produced an impressive body of useless work."

What's behind this self-deprecating humour? True bitterness? A healthy detachment from the egoistic self and its by-products? Not all of what George Elliott produced was "useless." In 1986, he published a wonderful essay on life in southern Ontario called *God's Big Acre* (Methuen), with photos by his fellow prankster and ex-ad man John Reeves. What emerges from Elliott's text is his knowledge about everything in "401 country," as he calls it, and the sympathetic but unsentimental view of the land and its people. After all, both he and Reeves are products of this country, and it shows.

THE WRITER WAS ALWAYS AT work throughout Elliott's career as diplomatic vagabond and advertising whiz-kid. A chance encounter got him back between two covers, and led to the publication of his new collection, *The bittersweet man*. Tim Struthers, an

English professor at the University of Guelph, in Ontario, whose mother happened to be born in Strathroy, edited a two-volume anthology of Canadian short fiction for McGraw-Hill Ryerson in 1992 called *The Possibility of Story*. Struthers included the final piece from *The kissing man*, called "The Way Back." Paying Elliott for the story proved to be a problem: no one knew where he was. Finally, through a combination of good luck and mutual friends, Elliott and Struthers met — and the writer came to the meeting with a silver

## THE WRITER WAS ALWAYS AT WORK THROUGHOUT ELLIOTT'S CAREER AS DIPLOMATIC VAGABOND AND ADVERTISING WHIZ-KID

tote bag full of stories. Struthers has a small publishing venture of his own called Red Kite Press, and the publisher in him pricked up his ears: here was a long-time favourite of his opening up a treasure chest of stories. Besides *The bittersweet man*, another book sprang from that tote bag: a story cycle set in an old people's home, to be published in the near future.

Why a small press? After all, Elliott has been used to the limelight in a lot of areas. But when it comes to publishing his kind of writing, the difference between small and large is negligible. "A bigger house like Methuen, which did *God's Big Acre*, might print a few hundred more copies, but that doesn't mean they'll get sold." At this point in his life,

Elliott is above the vanity of boasting of a "big-name" publisher, and he obviously enjoys his editorial fencing with Tim Struthers. Besides, he's writing for the reader's inner recognition, not commercial visibility. "You may know something that someone else will recognize and say, Yeah, that's it! That's what I'm looking for. I like T. S. Eliot when he said, 'Genuine poetry communicates before it is understood.' That's my attitude: recognition before comprehension." For that sudden sense of recognition, you don't need a big press.

THOUGH JUST AS POLISHED AND professional as *The kissing man*, *The bittersweet man* gives the reader a wholly different experience — after all, 32 years of intense living does change you. First of all, there's no shared geography, no linkage of places and the continuity that brings. "*The bittersweet man* happens all over the world because I've been all over the world," Elliott says.

As well, the new collection has a less optimistic tone: its characters are more bedraggled. It is an older book, more disillusioned. "The people in it have had time to become awful. But they're bittersweet because, though they're awful, there's still some hope." The man who sells bittersweet in the title story offers the same fleeting mystery as the man who offered kisses in the book 32 years earlier. But whereas the kissing man's kisses do bring comfort, when the bittersweet man turns up in the last paragraph of his story to offer Greg, the anguished protagonist, some relief, Greg rejects him out of hand. "A prick," is the way Elliott describes his poor protagonist.

Men tend to get a rough write in these stories, especially when it comes to the mine-field of relationships. "I have four stories in here about people I really

hate." Elliott says with great relish. Though women are often in trouble in Elliott's set-ups, men usually respond with confused, mumbling insensitivity. Sound familiar? The magical sense of *The kissing man*, the feeling of inhabiting a mystical and sympathetic landscape, has been replaced by dysfunctional couples and old guys whose local lunch-counter is being yuppified out of existence. Yet with the last stories in the collection — "The bittersweet man" and "Namesake" — the book seems to move back to the atmosphere of *The kissing man*, as if it did not want to give up those hallowed years quite yet. And who can blame it?

NOTHING RESOLVES — FOR SOME people, this is a hard lesson to learn. But at 71, ruddy and hearty and healthy, Elliott seems a fortunate man aware of his good fortune. His house sits on the Île d'Orléans, downstream from Quebec City, facing the shipping channel of the St. Lawrence River and the silver steeple of St-Michel-de-Bellechasse across the water.

"There are no pressures on me here," Elliott says by way of explanation of his healthy demeanour. "I get up in the morning, fix breakfast, then go out to the studio and crouch in front of the machine for two or three hours." The St. Lawrence, which is close enough to the sea to be salty and have 14-foot tides, provides a kind of companionship and checkpoint on the world for a man who lives alone. "I can judge the world economy according to the seaway traffic. If iron-ore boats are coming in, that means the auto industry is picking up. If wheat is going out, that means the Russians have got credit."

That's George Elliott all the way: attached to the world, knowledgeable about its ways, and ready to interpret it. ○

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# A Wise and Adult Answer

BY GEORGE ELLIOTT



CHARLES WAS INVITED back to Frederick to do the Labour Day Sunday morning service. As soon as he was alone in the church office he phoned Lois but got her answering machine. He said: "I'm doing a guest shot at Saint Cuthbert's. It's a hit-and-run visit. I called to let you know I'm here. I'm sorry I can't see you. I didn't want you to find out from someone else and be ticked off I didn't get in touch. Keep well."

Lois played back the message twice. Poor old Charles. What a come-down! Tucked away in that small college in northern Virginia. Teaching comparative theology and remedial English. She listened for an undercurrent in his voice. Were there old feelings of affection that might be revived? Was he phoning to find out if she was "with" somebody now? Was he phoning to say he was not "with" anyone? Her heart quickened. She felt grateful for being reminded of a time when things almost worked. Her cheeks felt warm as she let the message erase itself.

Lois tried to remember the affection that accumulated between them as they let themselves come together; but she remembered, instead, how awful it was when it all came to an end.

She pushed the phone back to make room for the folder of stationery. She wrote a carefully worded note to thank him for phoning. The last sentence was stiff, polite: "Hope all is going well between you and your new friend — I assume there is one — and that a good marriage is in your future." She read it again carefully. It was not flirtatious. No hint of his sudden departure from Saint Cuthbert's. It was a mature signal of amity, nothing more. The tone left him free to respond or not.

She put a stamp on the envelope quickly, before the warmth in her cheeks faded. She thought of printing "S.W.A.H." — sealed with a handshake — on the envelope, but didn't. She walked down to the corner and dropped it in the mailbox.

His reply came after the Columbus Day weekend. She was home for lunch. It was a fine autumn day. Young mothers strolled their babies out front. Old maples flaunted their bus-tour chic. His letter was in a wad of junk mail under the letter slot. She picked it up gratefully. She stood at the kitchen balcony door and felt the soft forgiving sun on her face. Forty minutes of freedom before she went back to the nig-

gling frustration of her workstation downtown.

She put his letter, unopened, in the wicker basket on the table. She prepared a cucumber and kiwi salad and glanced over to read her name in his precise, blocky handwriting. She thought vaguely of the last time they had been together — the textbook wisdom he dredged up, the spontaneity they both lost.

She sat down and slit open the envelope with the brass letter-opener he had given her one Christmas. The letter-opener was one of those ironies she liked to collect and store away where she wouldn't lose them. It was both a promise of many letters addressed to her that would need opening and a blunt symbol of severance.

Now, as she settled to read his letter, she reminded herself not to be analytical because analysis turned out to be destructive in its cleverness and led to mild symptoms of depression. She knew that analysis remains the basis of "meaningful" conversations. In the old days she could always pull her weight when somebody said "The trouble with you is —"

Ah, but who needs meaning? Who needs the keenings of one more disappointed lover? What we need is one great

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whoop of lunacy. Unprogrammed. Unanalysed. If only she could do that. Without offending. Damn. She fell back into the old gentility that drove her crazy.

Charles's letter was an ordered refutation of all the calm assumptions she had made about their friendship. His letter began abruptly: "Wrong on all counts." And it ended in the same tone of voice: "Every good wish to you too." There was an edge to his letter. Snippy. She reminded herself again not to dwell on the edge. Remember what happens when you overdose on analysis.

She slithered the cucumber and kiwi slices around on the plate. He was scolding her. Did he write it, hold on to it for a few days, uncertain, then drop it in the mailbox? Or did he whip it off, throw it in the box, and forget it? Letters between the peaceably separated should be cool and candid, but this one was cold and distant. Had she been wrong all this

time? Was he truly fed up with what they had thought was pretty good? Maybe he was covering up the bleeding of a larger wound he couldn't talk about?

God, when she had her old blind certitude she would have blurted out her guesses and suspicions. He used to like that. She couldn't do it now. There was a mutuality back then that made it easy for her to speculate. Now he would snub her for invading his privacy.

She read his letter carefully a second time and found new meanings in every sentence, meanings that may not have been there, but meanings that flattered her because that was her way. She left the letter open on the kitchen table to reproach her if she had made some wrong assumptions about him, and to prepare her for the writing of a wise and adult answer.

She tested opening sentences in her mind to see whether there was one that

would set the tone for a letter worth writing. "What brought us to such lousy hindsight in short, unsatisfying letters?" Or: "When literate, articulate people can't do it, who can?"

She wondered whether she should answer his letter. After all, he said she was wrong on all counts. She felt rattled with self-doubt. A good first sentence did not occur to her. Forget it. They fell apart. He just withdrew further than she did.

She didn't think she had misread his letter, but she didn't want to be found wrong if it turned out she had. She thought about it for too long. Her mind had turned into one of those rings of ribbon with a one-half twist in it that forms a convoluted circle you go around twice before you come back to where you began.

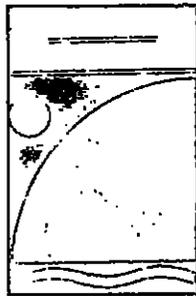
How could she ever trace the lovely unpredictability that brought him to her



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in the first place? Where would she begin the chronology of her approach to that rare state of grace — clichéd and therefore unspeakable — called “falling in love”? She remembered saying “grown very fond of you” instead and she blushed now at the arthritic imprecision of her words. Who knows where the beginning of the end was? Who says it's over now?

Analysers have trouble with real life, she thought. Real life is the randomness that gets in the way of the list of things that must be done. Maybe there are only two kinds of people who have no trouble dealing with randomness: the very rich because randomness is such a relief from the isolation and conformity of wealth, and the very poor because randomness is the body and texture of their lives. It's clumsy here in the middle; that's all.

Despite a final clarity that emerged

in her mind, she dared not respond to what she thought was in his letter. That was her way: incapable of the directness she admired in others, and always afraid of hurting.

Someone told her once she had a submerged but infinite capacity for cruelty and she believed it. If she had been Charles's victim once, maybe there was a way for her to become his predator.

If only she could step back out of herself, out of the ancient habit of politeness and self-abasement. If only she had the gift of talking “it” rather than just the parlour trick of talking “about it.” Maybe there's another way to send him a hint of her reality. A short story? A poem? Could her truth come out in disguise? Probably not. She would be inscrutable as usual. Enigmatic realism has a certain fashion these days, she had been told, but she thought it was like handling the irradiated truth with remote-control arms. A kind of

running away from home. Besides, whatever she might write would probably smack of a tiresome melancholy, the dreary, low-voltage pessimism for which she could find no antidote.

How about a short, civilized note to apologize for all past and wrong assumptions they had made about each other? Just ignore everything she thought was in his letter. But brevity and civilization, they had always betrayed her in the past. So be rambling, disorganized, uncharacteristic.

The kitchen darkened when a seasonal cloud passed before the sun. Red maple leaves swirled ahead of the west wind. Lois pushed back her half-eaten salad. She flipped Reverend Chuckie's letter into the wicker basket. Maybe she'd answer it some other day. ○

From *The bittersweet man*, by George Elliott. Published by Red Kite Press, P.O. Box 30, Guelph, Ontario, Canada N1H 6J6.



# BEHIND THE BEST-SELLER LIST

The inside story on why some books make it and some books don't

BY STEPHEN HENIGHAN

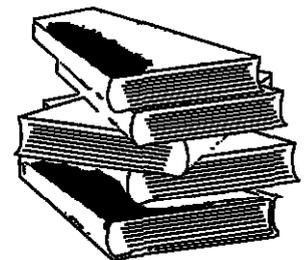
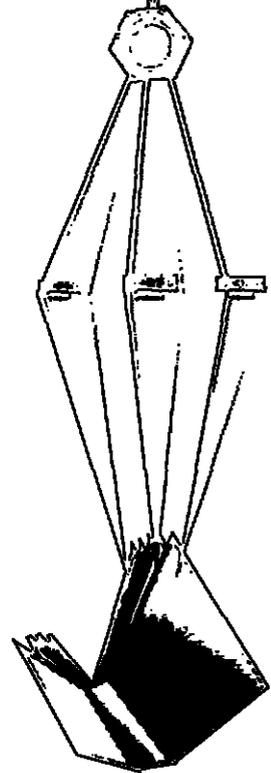
**E**VERY AUTHOR LONGS TO WRITE a best seller. It's only human, after all, to want to be famous. The same egotism that is required to complete a book — a capacity for remaining convinced over a period of years that others will be intrigued by what you have to say — also dictates that yours must be a book whose advent the world is awaiting with breathless anticipation. I knew that my first novel, published in 1990, would be a best seller. No other outcome was possible. When the novel sank, more or less without a ripple, I spent most of 1991 adjusting to this fact. I stitched together the conventional patchwork of part-time jobs — a little teaching, a little reviewing — and kept plugging away at my next novel, for which I nourished the usual vain hopes. Then one day the telephone rang.

"Stephen, how much do you figure your time is worth?" Every freelancer learns to lapse into cunning silence upon hearing words such as these, especially when the speaker is the books editor of a major newspaper. I managed not to reply. Bryan Demchinsky of the *Montreal Gazette* explained that he was planning to overhaul the *Gazette* best-seller list. He was looking for someone to run his new list. An article by another *Gazette* journalist recently having drawn to Bryan's attention the picturesque poverty in which I was living, he wondered whether I might be interested in the job. He could pay me \$75 a week.

I accepted. The prospect of one steady source of income, however small, to anchor my various erratically fluctuating odd jobs, was irresistible. And — who knew? — by working on best sellers I might unravel the secret of how to write one.

Until mid-1991, the *Gazette* reprinted its best-seller list from *Maclean's* magazine. The decision to stop using the *Maclean's* list was based on its perceived failure to reflect the reading habits of Montreal book buyers. The two books whose sales careers exposed the gaps in the *Maclean's* approach were a curious pair: V. S. Naipaul's *India: A Million Mutinies Now* and Reed Scowen's *A Different Vision: The English in Quebec*. In its hard-cover edition, Naipaul's book lacked a Canadian distributor. Despite being effectively barred from most of the retail outlets in the country, *India* popped up week after week on the best-seller list the *Gazette* received from *Maclean's*. All of the booksellers the *Gazette* consulted agreed that the national sales figures implied by the *Maclean's* listing were virtually unattainable for a book lacking a Canadian distributor.

National anomalies were matched by regional omissions. As I went about setting up the list by establishing contacts at English- and French-language Montreal bookstores, my preliminary inquiries confirmed a widespread impression that the former Quebec Liberal politician Reed Scowen's *A Different Vision* was selling at a briskly best-



sellerish pace. The fact that Scowen's book appeared on no national best-seller list provided more support for Demchinsky's arguments in favour of a "made-in-Montreal" list. The policy might in some ways seem insular, but as I was discovering in my exploration of other publications' lists, all of these rankings — supposedly the ultimate "objective" measure of the literary marketplace — were subject to their own peculiarities. Sometimes, as in the presence of Naipaul's undistributed book on the *Maclean's* list, these wrinkles defied logic; other trends, such as the sometimes disproportionate success enjoyed by Toronto writers on the "national" list of the *Globe and Mail*, appeared all too predictable. The most desirable course seemed to be that adopted by the *Village Voice Literary Supplement*, which compiles a list of "Our Kind of Best Sellers" from information provided by the sort of stores where *Voice* readers are likely to shop. Taking into account the differences between our respective readerships, I decided to try to make the *Gazette* list a similar "Our Kind of Best Sellers."

A COUPLE of weeks before I was due to compile my first list, Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* leapt onto the *Globe and Mail's* national best-seller list. I made a quick tour of downtown bookstores to see how Tan's novel was selling locally. *The Kitchen God's Wife* was nowhere to be found. Had it already sold out? No, I was told, it hadn't arrived. A metaphysical conundrum reared its head: how could a novel not yet on the market have become a best seller? Richard King of Paragraphe Books provided me with an answer. "A best seller," he said, "is a book that is meant to be a best seller."

The *Globe and Mail* list was, and to some extent still is, dependent on chain

stores. The legend at the head of the *Globe* list states that 500 bookstores across Canada contribute each week to its compilation. Two or three independent stores are mentioned as being "among bookstores participating in this week's survey." Ruth Noble, who puts together the *Globe* list, estimates that 40 per cent of the input comes from chain stores. According to Noble, the *Globe* is working to increase the proportion of independents among its contributors in order to give the list "a more national feel of what people are buying in little shops across Canada." She points to Timothy Findley's *Headhunter* and Jane Urquhart's *Away*, both of which made the *Globe* list at times when they weren't being stocked by Smithbooks or Coles, as evidence of the *Globe's* success in building up a solid base among the independents. At the same time, Noble concedes that the *Globe's* reliance on chain stores was more pronounced a couple of years ago, when *The Kitchen God's Wife* appeared. And the *Globe* list still has its detractors. Some booksellers complain that the *Globe's* contributor's form, which lists 20 potentially best-selling titles (while also allowing space for write-in votes), predisposes them to mention a given cluster of highly promoted books. Others continue to doubt the *Globe's* commitment to the independents. One Ontario independent bookseller whose store has been included in the *Globe's* list of "bookstores participating in this week's survey" told me: "Given the frequency with which they've cited us in the last year, they're sure as hell not polling many independents." Noble, however, states that *Globe* policy is to continue to shift the list "more strongly towards the independents."

It is tempting for best-seller lists to rely on chain stores: chains are easy to poll and can supply centralized statistics.

Their operations are so tightly coordinated, in fact, that one of the problems I encountered in setting up the *Gazette* list was that the Smithbooks store at the Fairview-Pointe Claire shopping mall didn't know what its own best sellers were. Until a diligent and helpful assistant manager agreed to perform a weekly tabulation on the *Gazette's* behalf, the store relied on a monthly listing of national best sellers sent from head office. National fashion, rather than local book-buying preferences, determined the books the store stocked and the quantities in which it ordered them. Coles has become even more notorious for huge, blind orders of highly promoted books. The result of this kind of homogenized bookselling is that any best-seller list heavily dependent on chain stores measures orders rather than sales.

There are two theories about why this occurs. The cynical theory dictates that having ordered tens of thousands of hard-cover copies of the latest blockbuster, the chains are angling hard to sell the book even if it turns out to be a dud. They include it on their best-seller list in the hope of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. The charitable theory focuses on the individual Coles or Smith's manager. Receiving a phone call from a newspaper asking about best sellers, the harried manager glances across the store, spots stacks of unsold copies of the latest Robert Ludlum or Danielle Steel doorstep, and blurts out the title of the book that is piled highest as being at the top of the list.

The cynical theory has more adherents than the charitable theory. A newspaper editor with whom I broached the subject of Coles's contributions to various best-seller lists, interrupted me in mid-sentence: "They lie." The manager of one of the stores contributing to the *Gazette* list — an independent with a strong com-

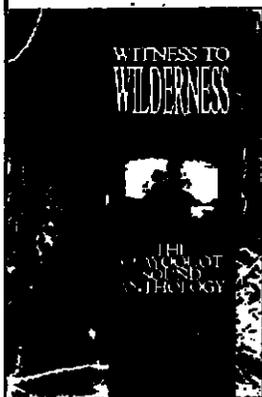
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mercial slant — warned me that she would not supply me with more than three titles each in fiction and non-fiction. She went on to explain, in a spirit of back-to-basics fervour, that she had begun her career at Coles. She had been so disheartened by being obliged, she claimed, to report “untrue” rankings that

she had promised herself in future, if she contributed to a best-seller list, only to mention titles that she was certain were selling well in her store that week.

*The Kitchen God's Wife* became a best seller before arriving in the bookstores because it received big advance orders from the chains. The chain stores' as-

sumption of a homogeneous national market made their outlook inimical to our attempt to compile a local “Our Kind of Best Sellers” item. Bryan Demchinsky and I agreed that we would weigh all stores we surveyed equally, regardless of their sales volume. In part this was a response to our suspicion that the chains' listings might not be reliable and in part, in *Village Voice* fashion, we had decided that such a policy represented the best way to cater to readers of the *Gazette* books section. The consumers of Ludlum and Steel did not make purchasing decisions on the basis of reviews: the people who read the *Gazette*'s Saturday review section to keep abreast of new books were more likely to shop at the independents.

**FOR THE NEXT** 15 months of my life Tuesday became best-seller day. Calling on Tuesday gave the stores time to tally up their weekend sales, while ensuring that the list was ready for the Saturday books section's Wednesday evening layout. Every Tuesday afternoon from 1:30 to 3:30, or as long as it took, I dialled frantically to reach every store on our list. Each week there would be at least a couple of stores where something had gone wrong, requiring me to plead, cajole, or call back several times. Most weeks, though, we managed to get our full complement of contributing stores. Once I had finished, I would perform my calculations, copy out the three lists—Fiction, Non-Fiction, and Books in French (which mixed fiction and non-fiction)—and jump on the Métro to deliver the list to the *Gazette*'s front desk by 5 p.m.

My afternoons on the phone ushered me into a world of diverse enthusiasms. The Smithbooks assistant manager raved over the phone about Robert Jordan fantasy novels. A manager at one

of the more refined independent bookstores, utterly scrupulous about the figures he submitted, also took advantage of my calls to offer judicious literary criticism of each of the titles he cited. Some stores would use my call as an opportunity to complain if a book they were promoting had received a bad review in the previous weekend's *Gazette*. Most stores ended up knowing my home phone number, which, since it ended in "00," they mistook for a *Gazette* office number. I began to receive calls at odd hours from stores attempting to answer customers' queries about titles, authors, and literary prize-winners. I developed a network of collaborative telephone relationships with a number of people whom I had never met. This proved especially true at the French stores, where menacingly formal voices, which for the first few weeks addressed me as "vous" and "Monsieur," soon melted into confidante-like intimacy, making me the repository of problems with bosses and boyfriends in pauses between reading out the week's best sellers.

An unbridgeable gulf divided the English and French reading publics. Compiling the list heightened my awareness of the extent to which mainstream writers from France, such as Sébastien Japrisot, Annie Ernaux, Régine Desforges, and Alexandre Jardin, dominated the Quebec book-selling scene. I discovered that in addition to the literary Québécois writers with whom I was familiar, there existed a vigorous strand of Québécois popular fiction represented by genre writers such as the historical novelist Chrystine Brouillet. The manic Québécois passion, largely imported from France, for translations of US writers such as Paul Auster, David Leavitt, and John Irving, also came as a surprise. *Less surprising, though more discourag-*

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ing, was the mutual lack of interest displayed by English-Canadian and Québécois readers in one another's fiction. The only Québécois novel to appear on my English fiction list was Roch Carrier's *Prayers of a Very Wise Child* (which also appeared on the *Globe* list, suggesting that Anglo-Quebec readers

take no greater interest in Québécois fiction than English-Canadian readers elsewhere in the country). The only English-Canadian novel to make my French list was Nino Ricci's *Le Serpent et les yeux bleus*, the translation of *Lives of the Saints*. Part of the reason for the translation's success was that it origi-

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nated in France and arrived in Quebec supported by the clout of a major Paris publisher. Ricci also did two things right in his dealings with the Quebec media: he spoke French, and he spoke it with an Italian accent rather than an English accent, circumventing the resistance to English-Canadian culture often evinced by Québécois journalists.

The disparity between English and French outlooks came to a head with the publication of Mordecai Richler's polemic *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!* The week after the book came out, one English store gleefully reported having sold 362 copies in less than three hours at a Richler signing. A few minutes later I phoned Coles. Due to a mix-up, the manager of the store's French section was assigned to read the English list to me over the phone. When he reached Richler's name, he became nearly inarticulate with

rage. "This book is not fiction, it is not non-fiction — it is science fiction!" It took nearly 10 minutes to extract the remainder of the list from him.

Looking back, I realize that our success in putting together a significantly different kind of best-seller list was limited. A few political books sold better in Montreal than elsewhere. Students of the McGill philosopher Charles Taylor bought enough copies of *The Malaise of Modernity* to hoist it onto the non-fiction list for a couple of weeks. Barry Lazar and Tamsin Douglas's *The Guide to Ethnic Montreal* also did well. Literary fiction by British writers such as Margaret Drabble and Martin Amis sold somewhat better in Montreal than it did nationally; some Toronto writers prominent on the *Globe* list either didn't do as well in Montreal (Daniel Richler) or failed to show entirely (Douglas

Cooper). During the 15 months that I compiled the *Gazette* list, no English Montreal fiction writer appeared on it — though Edward O. Phillips and David Homel each just missed on one or two occasions. The only hard-cover English-Canadian first novel to crack my top 10 was Carole Corbeil's *Voice-over*. ("There really aren't that many copies out there," Corbeil murmured during her Montreal tour, when I told her that her novel had placed second on the coming Saturday's best-seller list.)

A best seller remains, as Richard King told me, a book that is meant to be a best seller. We were able to avoid listing books before they appeared in the stores, but we couldn't escape the structure of mass book-marketing. Most best sellers are predetermined, though the scope of a particular book's success may vary according to timing, review space, or the author's performance with the media. What I learned about writing a best seller, in short, was that best-sellerdom has little to do with writing. Book marketing is increasingly international in scope. The result, as a recent article in *The Economist* noted, is that the same small group of books comes to dominate the best-seller lists in country after country. Back in Montreal, Bryan Demchinsky remains "absolutely committed to a local list despite all the problems." One negative consequence of mass marketing, he points out, is that booksellers rarely respond quickly enough to promote local books that show best-seller potential: "In your own backyard, with as much publicity as you could wish for, your chances are still pretty slim." A list devoted to regional tastes has become a quixotic notion in an era of global markets — but that may be all the more reason to keep such specimens alive. ○

# Celebrating Difference

*Despite media scare-mongering and political meddling, the Writing Thru 'Race' Conference achieved most of what it set out to accomplish*

BY CYRIL DABYDEEN

**M**AYBE IT WAS AUSPICIOUS that the Writing Thru "Race" Conference, attended by about 200 participants, was held during the Canada Day weekend (June 30–July 3). The Japanese-Canadian novelist Joy Kogawa called it "celebratory," as it indeed was. Others, more rhapsodic and feisty, described it as "history in the making." The venue was the Coast Plaza Hotel, nestled in beautiful, sprawling Stanley Park in Vancouver, adjacent to the waters of English Bay and the harbour. It rained most of the time, as if in some strange way the weather mirrored my own mood at the conference: one of reticence, almost muteness. I was willing to simply watch and observe and, periodically, to mull over Eldridge Cleaver's definition of literature, which I have long accepted as my own: "the combination of the alphabet with volatile elements of the soul."

Admittedly, I was curious as well; I wanted to see how it would all turn out, in view of the media brouhaha over this so-called "exclusionary" conference — a controversy blown out of proportion — and the denial of funding by Heritage Canada Minister Michel Dupuy, who appeared to give in to the Reform Party's charge that the conference was somehow "discriminatory."

In her keynote speech, Sunera Thobani (National Action Committee on the Status of Women) pounded the podium as she berated the



Reform Party, which she accused of being the representative of the far right in Canada. She found a sympathetic audience in this gathering of mostly younger writers as she lamented the view that women, gays and lesbians, people of colour, and immigrants were being called just another "interest group." Who indeed represented the true "national interest," she wanted to know, if not these same groups? Later on, delegates signed a petition to be sent to the minister about his "ill-conceived and precipitous" act in denying funding to the conference.

The conference was the brainchild of the Racial Minority Writers' Committee of the Writers' Union, with the editor and poet Roy Miki steering the initiative through. He admitted being a much-wearied man; and he sometimes appeared puzzled by it all.

In sponsoring the Writing Thru "Race" Conference, the Writers' Union indeed seemed to be on the road to becoming a more inclusive organization. And perhaps the union will never be the same again, despite the conservative voices in it. (At one point, the impulse among many delegates at the conference was to break away from the Writers' Union and form a separate organization — but this was fleeting. Winnipeg's Uma Parameswaran, among others, quickly cautioned against this move.) The further challenge before the union is whether it will become involved in advocacy and activism.

Conference participants wrestled with some complex issues: the *angst* of identity and marginalization in Canadian society; writing from perspectives often reflective of anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles, struggles whose history may not always be familiar to many of the new writers; their own unique role as writers given to this form of social commitment, even though writing is often a solitary, introspective vocation. Surprisingly, all the discussions occurred without the self-dramatizing elements that might have diverted attention from the equally complicated, but inevitably discursive question of who does one really write for — the minority community, or the mainstream?

For many participants, there appeared to be two key questions: how does one's writing life fit in with struggles for employment equity and access

to basics such as housing, social services, and education?; and are alliances between First Nations people and people of colour (mostly immigrants) to bring about substantive change in the cultural field really the best strategy? Greg Young-Ing, of Theytus Books (a Native press in B.C.), said unequivocally: "Native people have different experiences from immigrants."

The views expressed about Native storytelling and oral property being appropriated struck a compelling chord; as did the notion that Canada's laws should be amended (or extended) to include oral property as copyrighted material. Jeanette Armstrong was cogent and persuasive in articulating the Native position that change is needed in the writing community as a whole; and "Writing must go back to the people, to where it belongs," argued the First Nations writer Lenore Keeshig Tobias. Maybe writing for the community, first and foremost, will supplant the star system that promotes the singular artist.

**AT THE CONFERENCE.** I kept thinking of Canada Day celebrations on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, where I might have been if I hadn't gone to Vancouver. Images flitted through my mind, among them the spectacular fireworks on the Hill, which are a more than symbolic extolling of Canadian unity from east to west. It seemed to me that the joy of coming together was also part of the spirit of the conference's discussions about inclusion/exclusion. And there were solitudes, too: clusters based on race, gender, age, sexual orientation, geography, or simply the cultivation of friendships. In this amorphous community, the talk of oppression and the confrontation with racism, systemic and otherwise, seemed to be the unifying fac-

tor. Reacting to the power structures influencing a Eurocentric literature that is considered "universal" rather than an expression of "white solipsism" (in Adrienne Rich's words) provided the impetus to discuss the full realization and apprehension of new forms and literatures in a culturally diverse landscape. The conference also engendered what the Toronto writer Dionne Brand called "a moment of solidarity ... a good thing will come as the writers face a number of new challenges." Above all, the conference was dominated by a spirit of "celebration," as the Montreal-based poet Gerry Shikatani emphasized.

**CELEBRATION** manifested itself palpably in the three nights of readings: memorable moments with the range and power of words, the effusion of language, the blood-beats of dialect, passion, and tenderness. And a profusion of mother tongues and their resonances: Urdu, Punjabi, Spanish. The inimitable Clifton Joseph (Toronto) at one end of the spectrum, and the young Vancouver poet Mercedes Baines, pulsating with a unique energy, liberating the libido — women's and men's — with satire and protest at the other. The more experienced writers were juxtaposed with younger ones: the Inuit writer Alootook Ipelle, whose tremulous voice rose in his evocation of the landscape of the North, blended with the Jamaican-born Afua Cooper's powerful extolling of womanhood in poetry-cum-performance. For many the readings — and the tributes to the departed Sam Selvon and Roy Kiyooka — were all that mattered. An appreciation for all the possibilities of language, shared by an audience of non-whites and whites alike, led to an inclusiveness that extended far beyond simplistic ideas about "exclusion."

**INEVITABLY** it was asked: what is so wrong with a few sessions where First Nations/writers of colour could talk among themselves without inhibition, could form caucuses and express intimate and strongly held views, and even ventilate a collective *angst* stemming from one's racial identity and sense of marginalization? The Vancouver novelist Sky Lee put things in metaphysical perspective by saying that the participants were engaged in the process of "sharing journeys of death and life"; this in the context, we were reminded, of Robert Fulford's charges (in the *Globe and Mail*) that the conference was racializing the culture as a whole. As Lee and others pointed out, seven-eighths of humankind consists of people of colour, so what exactly was the problem?

**MARCEL DUPUY's** decision to deny the conference Heritage Canada funding unwittingly gave the event a sharp focus, a voice and presence it might not otherwise have had. While the action triggered expressions of outrage in some quarters, it also galvanized "a groundswell of support," according to Susan Crean, a former chair of the Writers' Union. Donations came from various sources — from institutions such as trade unions, and individuals such as Robert Munsch, Pierre Berton, and Margaret Atwood. It was all a "wonderful climax of a complex event to organize," in Crean's words.

Perhaps the conference was the organic manifestation of things unfolding: things yet to come in what is being planned or will happen in a growing and expanding Canadian literature. In the future, perhaps writers of colour will be on a par with their white colleagues in having equal access to all aspects of periodical and book publishing.

**THE NATIVE ORATOR** Chief Leonard George (son of Chief Dan George) urged: "Use your anger and get beyond it ... for our circle to be strong." He drew attention to the "subconscious of your dreams" as the force driving one's creativity. He added that Natives are starting to move away from the oral tradition — the purest form of history — and are now bent on rewriting history with the "pen of our conquerors ... so that we can become proud and dignified." His final invocation and prayer: "Let the Creator be our guide, because this is our individual responsibility." Writers of all racial backgrounds could seek no higher goal.

The conference's "high road," as the Saskatchewan writer Ven Begamudré saw it, lay in building alliances or coalitions, as new friendships formed through the sharing of ideas and practical information about editing, publishing, and writing. Admittedly, according to some participants, discussion of such practicalities was limited at the conference. Indeed, the absence of attention to the elements of craft left a few writers, such as the Toronto novelist Cecil Foster, feeling they had gained little from the experience. His sense of regret was shared by some of the younger writers, too. And issues such as whether CanLit is truly embracing writing in languages other than the official ones, or the apparently divided loyalties of writers of mixed-race backgrounds, seemed unresolved in the context of political constructs such as otherness and marginalization.

**"WRITING IS** the most liberating form of activity." Roy Miki said. The final resolutions and recommendations brought forward by the conference provided the opportunity for First Peoples

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As Joy Kogawa put it: "Exclusion is not a way of life." Indeed, the conference was "a necessary phase ... a kind of gestation ... and any creative process requires this kind of joyful gestation because it cannot have its borders transgressed, or the seed that's developing will die." Now what must follow, she adds, is for "the seed to be nurtured in quietness and safety ... and it was wonderful that people would want to come and join in ... this is a birth!" ○

## SEXUAL

A reply to Victoria Branden's 'Get That Grin Off Your Face!' and 'No Sex, Please, We're Gents'

BY LYNN CROSBIE

**I**N 1993 I EDITED AN anthology of women's representations of sex and the body for Coach House Press entitled *The Girl Wants To*. Some reviewers were disquieted by the anthology's explicit nature, and sometimes, when I was promoting the book, I felt just like Hugh Hefner and understood why he felt compelled to compose the complex and arcane *Playboy* Philosophy. One of my favourite reviews, which appeared in the *Globe and Mail*, was written by Sarah Harvey, who, not trusting her own appalled reaction to the book, sought the opinions of "two lesbians" and others. In "Get That Grin Off Your Face!" and "No Sex, Please, We're Gents," Victoria Branden's two-part article in *BiC* about sex-writing, Branden also consults "younger readers" about sex in the arts, and discovers that they think of sex as "exclusively private" and equate sex-writing, disapprovingly, with "spectator sex." Her sex survey is touching, as it supports her effort, throughout her work, to assert that she is not a prudish "older generation female." But the "I asked two lesbians" approach to criticism is not only methodologically corrupt, it implies that certain groups es-

entially concur on issues. What I like about women's sex-writing is its varied nature; the best collections in this genre highlight the fact that there is no erotic consensus among women, that, in Mary Gaitskill's words, "you can't legislate your sexual fantasies."

Branden's objection to sex-writing is carefully situated in these essays; she is not offended by graphic depictions of sex, she is *bored* by them. The word "boring" and many of its synonyms fly like shrapnel as Branden tatters her thesaurus in order to debunk what is "tedious," "wearisome," "dull," and "monotonous" about the composition and production of female-authored erotic and pornographic literature in Canada. The variations on the theme of boredom outlined here are, paradoxically, lively and inflammatory. I found myself sawing through Branden's essays with a highlighter, and savaging them with a blunt pencil as I tried to formulate a response to their central argument. I also found myself resenting the fact that my response to these "opinion" pieces is already situated, within the texts, as the prurient interest of an insipid voluptuary. *The Girl Wants To*, among other sex-writing collections, is

## POSITIONS



implicated here as one of the books of "slurb" and "gunk" produced by avaricious "porn-peddlers." And although I have no circular waterbed to pontificate from, I would like to disabuse Branden of this offensive characterization.

I am almost tempted to dismiss Branden's ideas as the harmless and quaint opinions of a relic of second-wave feminism. Her pursed-mouth distaste for four-letter words and her fondness for picturesque terms like "gents" and "the dear dead days" are rather sweet, as is her veneration of the elliptical sex scene (the

staircase scene in *Gone with the Wind* is cited as an endearing classic), and her wish that Margaret Atwood would only write more “funny, delightful” novels. “Life is sad enough,” she observes, “without exposing oneself to moroseness-inducing downers.” The spunky optimism (and hip phrasing) of this remark alone prohibits retaliatory invective. What is mildly right-wing and toothless in the essays, however, often gives way to intolerance, revisionist scholarship, and dire misinformation.

Branden’s assessment of Canadian literature, for example, is shockingly

by a quarrel with Laurence’s sex-writing that was predicated on the repulsive line “Ride my stallion, Morag,” but not by Branden’s critique, which focuses on the “painstaking” explicitness of her sex scenes. Because we live in a country where brain-dead pedagogues are busy trying to ban *The Diviners* outright, the explicitness of the book’s language raises more critical issues — such as censorship and institutionalized decency — than Laurence’s affront to the aesthetics of the boudoir. A discussion of what is gloomy and depressing about Laurence’s sex-writing may be appropriate in an ar-

her critique of Atwood, Laurence, and other women writers’ “really depressing and gloom-inducing” sex scenes is the possibility that these scenes are often powerful critiques of sexual politics. Sexual oppression may be a downer, but it is a grim reality that many Canadian women writers have effectively confronted and contested in their work.

Branden’s forceful exception to the women writers’ depressing characterizations of sex led me to speculate, with some admiration, that her own sexual experiences have been unilaterally fabulous. Because there is such a strong



PATRICIA SEAMAN

miniature in its scope; her discussion of the genre is limited to kingpins such as Robertson Davies, Margaret Laurence, Atwood, and a few other luminaries. Someone who remarks that she no longer reads Canadian novels is clearly unfit to assess the genre, but Branden soldiers along, compressing the work of a small selection of writers into an air-tight critical canister. Laurence’s *The Stone Angel* is determined to be “unreadable,” and *The Diviners* is attacked because it depicts sex as being “gloomy and moroseness-inducing.” I could be swayed

by a quarrel with Laurence’s sex-writing, but Branden exhibits no familiarity with the concept of sexual-textual pleasure.

Atwood’s depictions of sex — in her “funny, delightful” early novels — is praised, as the heroines of these novels “rather like sex,” but don’t discuss it in any detail. *The Edible Woman*, a novel that features a man resting an ashtray on his lover’s back post-coitus, is singled out for its amusing and tasteful sex scenes, while the later novels are reviled because of their accounts of “unenjoyable” sex. What Branden overlooks in

joy-of-sex undercurrent to her work, one might imagine that she would be an authoritative commentator on the topic of sexual pleasure, but all Branden’s talk of *ennui* is a mere smokescreen. What is called for in her work is the obliteration of graphic sex writing, writing which is “insulting,” “unsubtle,” and “bad art.”

Branden declares, in a casual *Fahrenheit 451* way, that explicit sex-writing “can be dispensed with,” and suggests, heretically, that sex-writers and publishers are “all frustrated virgins.” Such theories would be less offen-

sive if they weren't so reflective of the parochial and totalitarian manner in which our censors conduct their business. I remember seeing Mary Brown (Ontario's head censor-despot of films at the time) lecture in 1984, and being struck by the ways in which the political left and right can converge on the issue of censorship.

Both radical feminists and conservatives have a vested interest in the suppression of exploitative, misogynist pornography, and Branden cannily situates her own argument within these

**The thought of Canadian literature being produced and organized around what Branden thinks is delightful is frankly horrifying**

(left/right) dipoles. She excoriates Mordecai Richler's sex-writing for its cruel sexism and implies that it is because the work is explicit that it is exploitative. Other male writers in her curious CanLit survey are praised for having "abandoned" graphic sex-writing as "old hat" and "sludge"; Branden's argument pivots on this dubious point. If men have stopped writing graphically about sex, women should too, she insists: "strip-teases," she notes, with an egalitarian flourish, "whether male or female, are dismal and disheartening" — tell that to the mai-tai set at the Tropicana.

According to Branden, it is society's "poverty of spirit" that is illustrated by those who "want or need" strip-teases, real or fictional, and she is both adamant in her disavowal of women's sex-writing, and completely oblivious of its history, structure, and meaning.

I am not persuaded that male writers have stopped writing about sex — the only sex-free bestseller I can think of off-hand is *Jurassic Park*, which is merely sexist (the large, vicious female dinosaurs are referred to as males). In Canada, scores of lusty gay and heterosexual men continue to produce sex-writing; however, men's sex-writing has been overshadowed lately by women's work in this genre. Any intelligent response to sex-writing must consider both sex and sexuality, and it is reductive and inaccurate to refer to women's sex-writing as an imitative genre, as Branden does when she constructs phrases like "Richler and his female counterparts." Historically, female sexuality has been male-authored: when women, as authors, begin to inscribe their own sex and sexuality in their work, they resist being, in Ann Rosalind Jones's words, "a subject of discourse" and become "a subject in discourse." By authoring their own experiences, women move from being sexual objects to being potent, speaking sexual subjects.

In the course of critiquing Richler's fiction, Branden cites a passage in which a man "whispers indecencies into [a] stewardess's ear, making her flush with pleasure," and states: "if [Richler's men] ever check the women's opinions, they might learn that it's not with pleasure that the stewardess is flushing." I can imagine a collection of erotica entitled *Check the Stewardess's Opinion*: women's sex-writing subverts traditional subject/object positions, and informs readers, in a variety of ways,

exactly what does make women flush. Women sex-writers are less counterparts than counter-attackers — one of the strongest impulses behind this genre is women's desire to challenge conventional patriarchal representations of female sexuality.

Branden's belief that women's sex-writing reproduces sexist ideology is spurious given its context within essays that reproduce such wildly repressive ideas about women's rights. Issues of sexual politics, freedom of speech, desire, imagination, and individuality are ignored in these essays in favour of a reactionary call for abolition.

The thought of Canadian literature being produced and organized around what Branden thinks is delightful is frankly horrifying. Yet she calls for the destruction of one of the most politically and artistically significant literary genres with the nonchalance of a Roman emperor.

Even more horrifying is the heterosexism encoded in her work; lesbian sex-writing is mentioned in the context of *outré* and criminal practices such as "bestial" and "kiddy" sex, and sodomy is described as one of a number of "unpleasantnesses." Gay and lesbian writers who have existed on the margins of CanLit and who continue to suffer the consequences of homophobic legislation and censorship have a compelling reason to produce subjective sex-writing. Subjective accounts of homosexuality effectively negate dominant cultural ideas about sexual practices deemed to be deviant, or, in Branden-parlance, "wearisome."

In her rhapsody over the staircase scene in *Gone with the Wind*, Branden says that "when Rhett picked up Scarlett and ran up those stairs, we knew what was going to happen." What is not clear is whether Branden would know what

was going to happen if Scarlett ran up the stairs with Melanie. Sex-writing provides, among other things, practical information about alternative sexual practices and the vast and complex field of human desire.

We may, as Branden suggests, all "know how" to do it, but many of us may not know how to do it with a dental dam (the lesbian answer to condoms), or, more significantly, many of us may not know how to legitimate or fulfil our own desires, or know that we have the right to do so. Marian Engel's *Bear* is one of the books Branden dislikes because of its "embarrass[ing]," "unintentional comedy." *Bear* is ironic, but not comedic; its sexually abused narrator finds pleasure through cunnilingus as opposed to intercourse, and it is one of the first mainstream Canadian women's novels that situates the clitoris at the sexual centre.

Alice Munro is not discussed in Branden's essays, although her accounts of adolescent female sexuality are disquieting and certainly "moroseness-inducing." Munro's work serves as an argument for sex-writing, as the female characters of small-time Ontario are often victims of hideous misinformation about their own sexuality. Sexual assault, botched abortions, and rape are viewed in Munro's work through the lens of perverse ideologies about women's desires, bodies, and gender roles, ideologies that are challenged in the kind of sex-writing that isn't available in the Jubilee library.

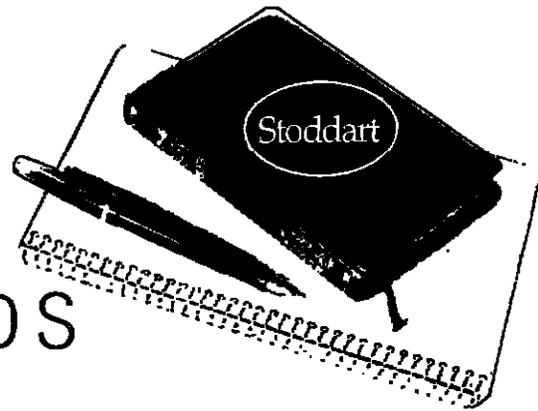
It is because writers like Atwood, Munro, and Laurence tackled themes of sexual oppression in their early sex-writing that more contemporary writers can begin to explore the regions of sexual pleasure — second-wave feminism, ideally, provides a point of departure for the

From the bestselling author of  
THE STONE DIARIES

Swann

A LITERARY MYSTERY

CAROL  
SHIELDS



WINNER OF THE CRIME WRITERS' ARTHUR ELLIS AWARD

broader, more inclusive third wave. I thought a lot about second- and third-wave feminism when I compiled *The Girl Wants To*, and realized that the political and literary strategies of most women writers are too fluid and complex to compartmentalize. My ambitions, as an editor and feminist, concern representation and inclusion; I am interested in the evolution of the radical-integral woman who, in Nicole Brossard's words, "emerg[es] from our life stories." Ultimately, my interests and Branden's interests collide at this point. I have spent far too many years in the academic salt-mines not to be wary of anyone who uses *King Lear* as an example of an "uplift[ing]" text and props it up as a substitute for women's sex-writing. While I tripped over *Lear* a hundred times in school, I never encountered the work of Radclyffe Hall, Daphne Marlatt, Gayl Jones, or Kathy Acker (*ad*

*infinitum*) outside of highly specialized courses that male students avoided in droves. I am even more wary of shabby scholarship, censor-lust, and any third-rate feminist polemic that addresses me as "dear sister." At this late point in time, I don't want to have to explain that novels other than *The Wars* or *Dancing in the Dark* have been published, and I'm repelled by Branden's derisive interpretations of my own and other women's sexuality and politics (disguised as a treatise on boredom).

What I love about second-wave feminist writing is the slogans this movement produced, lovely, furious slogans like "Know Your Enemy." If we, as women, are to continue fighting our marginalization in the arts, we must be aware that sometimes this enemy, like Branden, calls you "dear sister" and asks you to surrender the fight. ○

BY DAVID PROSSER

# Looking Past the Print

**Y**OU SEE THEM EVERYWHERE now, even in bookstores: those computer-generated eye-teasers known as stereograms. Gape long enough at the seemingly random arrangements of blobs and squiggles, and three-dimensional images suddenly seem to bulge out of the page at you. The trick is to refocus your eyes so that you're not so much looking

began to panic: I'm not getting it, it's all just squiggles. But then I remembered that these words are meant to be heard, not read, and that they cannot be separated from the other elements — dance, music, design — of the performance. Reading the monologue *Changing Bodies*, for instance, is a substantially different experience from hearing and seeing it performed by a man dressed as a lobster. Let Brooker's language wash over you, and keep your mind focused on an image of what these plays might look and sound like, and the humour (and elegiac beauty) of his surreal cartoons quickly becomes apparent.

In *Doctor Thomas Neill Cream* (Talonbooks, 126 pages, \$12.95 paper), David Fennario uses the story of the McGill University-educated abortionist and brothel keeper who may have been Jack the Ripper to indict such "nation-building" historical figures as Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Lord Strathcona, Sir William Osler, and Sir Hugh Allen. Murderers and whoremasters the lot of them, according to Fennario, though he does explain in an appendix that he really means that they were criminal only "in their general intentions" as exploiters of the working poor. Yes, well; the play itself shows Strathcona personally dispatching a potentially troublesome prostitute by braining her with the Last Spike. If Fennario's polemic seems strident on the page, though, it's safe to bet that in performance — with the chorus of murdered women visibly there on stage, their incantatory comments on the action haunting our ears — it would leave its audience not only convinced but sputtering with outrage.

Performance adds an extra dimension of irony to plays that deal with the art of the theatre. The unpleasingly titled volume *Big-Time Women From Way Back When* (Playwrights Canada, 236 pages, \$14.95 paper) contains Sally Clark's *Jehanne of the Witches*, a fascinating interpreta-



GUNTAR KRAVIS

## **From Never Swim Alone, by Daniel MacIvor**

at the page as trying to look *through* it. Rather like reading plays, actually. In both cases, what's immediately visible doesn't tell the whole story: to see what the artist means you to see, you have to look past the print.

Some scripts require a bit more squinting than others. Blake Brooker's *Ilsa, Queen of the Nazi Love Camp and Other Plays* (Red Deer College Press, 184 pages, \$12.95 paper) doesn't make for easy reading. Brooker's writing is dense with imagery and allusion, and it's easy for the reader to get bogged down in the poetic ambiguities of a single line. Halfway through the second piece in the collection, *The Land, The Animals*, I

tion of the Joan of Arc story as a collision between paganism and patriarchy, and Beth Herst's wryly sympathetic *A Woman's Comedy*, which uses the career of the Restoration playwright Aphra Behn to illustrate the limits that society places on art and love. Clark's piece is partly about art too, for it is a play within a play: Jehanne's story is being told retrospectively, in a theatre performance staged by Gilles de Rais, a.k.a. Bluebeard, with a boy playing the Maid.

Questions of art and life occupy much of Jim Bartley's *Stephen & Mr. Wilde* (Blizzard, 79 pages, \$10.95 paper), in which Oscar Wilde gets talking to Stephen Davenport, the ex-slave who acted as his valet during Wilde's visit to America. Who can claim greater authority: the artist with no real experience of hardship who can nonetheless discern the essence of truth in the experience of others, or the uncreative nonentity who has absorbed the truth about life through the welts on his flayed back? Unfortunately, since Davenport is portrayed as hardly less intelligent or articulate than Wilde, their relationship stays rooted in the gentlemanly conventions of the debating hall. More visceral conflicts have to be imposed from outside, in the form of a snooty newspaper hack who has stumbled on the secret of Davenport's past.

*Never Swim Alone & This Is a Play* (Playwrights Canada, 101 pages, \$10.95 paper) presents two plays by Daniel MacIvor. The latter is an entertaining metatheatrical romp, somewhere between *The Real Inspector Hound* and *Noises Off*, in which we overhear the thoughts of actors as they perform in some dreadful tosh about long-lost brothers. A surreal moment of communion at the end, though, resonates with surprising poignancy. *Never Swim Alone*

starts out as an amusing theatre game set on a beach in a bay by a distant point. Refereed by a girl in a blue swimsuit, two men compete in rituals of one-upmanship. "Race you to the point?" asks the girl, repeatedly — but the point, when we reach it, turns out to be a revelation of tragedy. It's a beautiful piece, spare, evocative, funny, and sad.

Some plays stubbornly refuse to offer illusions of depth. In *The Wild Guys* (Blizzard, 63 pages, \$10.95 paper), a gentle male-bonding comedy by Andrew Wreggitt and Rebecca Shaw, four guys get lost on a wilderness retreat, get scared by a bear, and confess that they don't understand women. Here, what you read is what you get — most of it being easy yuks derived from the sending up of psychobabble. "Can you hear the Chi beginning to move in you like a wind, awakening your heart and lungs and liver?" asks one of the guys, a New Age wimp. "I can hear my stomach," replies his more down-to-earth companion.

*Eureka!* (Coteau, 176 pages, \$14.95 paper) is a collection of seven one-act plays from Saskatchewan chosen with secondary-school students in mind. In the introduction, the editors (Jacquie Johnston Lewis and Dianne Warren) tell us that some of the plays "were written by individual playwrights from their own unique perspectives." Hmm. With the exception of Lynn Kirk's *Men and Angels* and Rex Deverell's *Switching Places*, which come with sufficient dramaturgical sweetener, the contents of the volume should be taken for medicinal purposes only. After manfully swallowing these tendentious pronouncements on alcoholism, date rape, and the cutting down of trees, I began to worry that perhaps teenagers actually *like* being dosed with propaganda coated with sticky "Sesame Street" language. Here's

a bit of dialogue from *Wheel of Justice*, a collective creation by the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program:

I represent many different women. I dropped out of school at a young age. Boredom and peer pressure introduced me to the drug and alcohol scene .... With hardly any parenting skills, I tried to look after my baby but I couldn't seem to cope with all the responsibilities. Employers would not hire me because of the colour of my skin ....

Oh, barf.

If moral lessons are truly what young minds crave, a much healthier bet for school production would be John Mighton's *Body and Soul* (Coach House, 56 pages, \$9.95 paper), which begins with a scene of necrophilia and goes on to sound a Dire Warning about the imminent destruction of human intercourse — sexual and spiritual — by the nascent technology of virtual reality. Intelligent and literate, it's not meant to be a play for young people, which is precisely why it would reward them so richly.

Or why not try them with *The Birds* (Exile, 95 pages, \$14.95 paper), Gwendolyn MacEwen's posthumously published adaptation of Aristophanes's satire? I hated it at first, with its jokey, coy dialogue and its gratuitous grafting on of references to Quebec nationalism and American cultural domination. I was looking at the page, of course, seeking only literary qualities (the play is a classic, after all, and MacEwen was a poet). Then I refocused, and thought: what if you gave it to schoolkids and let them run with it? And suddenly there it was, springing out of the page at me, vivid, sharp, and solid as anything. ○

BY BRIAN FAWCETT

# Seeing the Forest and the Trees

IN WILLIAM BLAKE'S COSMOLOGY, the lowest plane of mental existence was Urizen, which he explained as "single vision, or Newton's Sleep." Today we'd probably situate Urizen somewhere between binary logic and excessive single-mindedness — it's the mental vice of imagining the world as one would prefer it to be, and then arranging incoming phenomena

to fit a dictatorial logic while ignoring whatever refuses to sit comfortably with that logic. In the last few years discourse on the environment has been rife with this affliction. But maybe things are finally looking up. This year's books on the environment seem to be leaning slightly towards cosmology

rather than utopia. Several go beyond merely illustrating the self-comforting limitations of single-mindedness, and one or two actually show how interesting things can be when we do so.

Two books deal with a subject near and dear to my heart: forest policy in British Columbia. The chronic over-harvesting of B.C. forests has created vast and largely ignored clearcuts in the northerly regions of the province. It has also recently produced, all along the portions of the coast that are attractive to the mass media, a series of violent confrontations between logging industry and trade union apologists on the one

side, and environmentalists and most of B.C.'s sane citizens on the other.

The first book to step boldly into this fray is Cyril Shelford's *Think Wood! The Forest Is An Open Book; All We Have To Do Is Read It* (Orca, 190 pages, \$14.95 paper). Shelford is an old trapper and hand-logger who spent his youth nose to nose with falling trees and a lot of other things that require common sense in order to survive. Admittedly, he was also a member of the province's legislature for 23 years and the minister of agriculture under two Bennett premiers, but he was enough of a maverick on forest policy that he left the Social Credit party over it. His book is about what the forest industry — and the forests — might look like if everyone involved behaved sensibly: loggers could log, corporations would profit, governments would collect taxes, and ordinary folks could go to the mall. In Shelford's view, all that's needed is a coherent land-use plan, more value-added use of what he calls "fibre," timely reforestation, and a huge dose of good faith on the part of everyone involved.

He's perfectly correct about this, but unfortunately less than fully coherent. Throughout his long political career, one imagines, he was briefed by far too many assistant deputy ministers who didn't know bullshit from breakfast and therefore thought that a coherent land-use plan could stand up to the joint onslaught of spineless politicians and single-minded corporate managers. Too often, Shelford simply parrots his briefing papers rather than using his own eyes and experience, with the result that he's long on anecdote and homily, and profoundly short on answers that will make sense to anyone other than forest-industry hosers and government ADMs. There are other related shortcomings to this book: too many statistics don't add up (Shelford let the ADMs do the addition) and it's too trusting of the industry's



*Mural of old-growth forest by Robert Dobie and Terry Gilecki, from Forestopia*

excuses for past misbehaviour. Moreover, it's a book that can't envision a forest practice that isn't simply an extension of past practices.

**Forestopia: A Practical Guide to the New Forest Economy** (Harbour, 120 pages, \$16.95 paper), by the well-regarded environmental activist and author Michael M'Gonigle and the journalist Ben Parfitt, definitely can imagine a forest practice different from those of the past, and for that reason alone, it is profoundly heartening — and fascinating.

The book's argument, in a nutshell, is that present forest practice is wasteful, that it is unprofitable to the local communities who have to live with its environmental, economic, and social debris, and that the industry doesn't pay its fair share of taxes. The authors' statistics show that, under the present system, forestry jobs are few and shrinking in number, and stumpage fees are woefully inadequate. Moreover, the authors hint at what is becoming apparent to everyone in B.C. — that the corporate profits leave the province and, for the most part, the country. But perhaps the most interesting and crucial phenomenon M'Gonigle and Parfitt uncover is that the current controllers of the industry are inherently hostile to creating the secondary industries that would rejuvenate B.C.'s fragile economy. None of this is exactly news, but what has been lacking in the past are factual analyses to prove the misuse, and suggestions for practical alternatives to existing harvest practices. Both are in this book.

The new forestry practices M'Gonigle and Parfitt offer up in *Forestopia* constitute the most detailed illustration I've ever seen of how industrial localism might actually provide a sane way of harvesting our rapidly shrinking forest base while providing much-needed jobs. The

only quibble I have is with their statistical analysis, which is sometimes a little partisan. But an 80 percent dose of their brand of common sense mixed with a 20 percent dose of Cyril Shelford's might give us a way out of the mess that 40 years of smash-and-grab logging has mired us in. And that *is* good news.

Elsewhere on the environmental front, the seamless academic rhetoric of Dimitrios I. Roussopoulos's **Political Ecology** (Black Rose, 180 pages, \$34.95 cloth, \$15.95 paper) hides almost as much as it reveals. Like most contemporary theoretical books coming from the radical left (in this case from the Anarchist left), what it is hiding is the desperate scramble for political legitimacy after the collapse of Marxism as a scientific theory. At one level, *Political Ecology* is an attempt to make readers see the leftist elements of Europe's Green movement as the logical heir to the radical Marxist legacy, and as such it's all too easily dismissed as mystical gibberish.

That's really a shame, because Roussopoulos also provides readers with a concise history of the environmental movement and its philosophical bases. This, together with useful definitions of the current radical environmental actors and a series of thumbnail sketches of primary issues of the moment, makes *Political Ecology* very useful and timely. And Roussopoulos's concluding sentences ought to give all of us — whatever our political leanings — pause:

The choice ... is between the creation of a super world State based on a world capitalist economy that attempts to regulate the environment and minimize the worst impacts of the international war system or the ... patient

renovation and reconstruction of human society.

Considerably drier and less timely is **Stifling Debate: Canadian Newspapers and Nuclear Power** (Fernwood, 123 pages, \$11.95 paper), by Michael Clow with Susan Machum. Certainly the subject matter is interesting, but the book is Clow's Ph.D. dissertation, it suffers from the stuffy methodological arrogance of the social sciences, and its conclusion, that the nuclear industry tends to get its point of view better represented in the newspapers than saner opposing viewpoints, is hardly a huge revelation. Further, its coverage of media is limited (print only, and just four Canadian papers), muddled, and out of date (Clow's analyses cover the period from the mid-1970s to 1983).

**Winning Back the Words: Confronting Experts in an Environmental Public Hearing** (Garamond, 190 pages, \$16.95 paper) looks like the same sort of book as *Stifling Debate*, but is, once you get beyond the dull cover, marvellously intelligent and useful. The authors — Mary Richardson, Joan Sherman, and Michael Gismondi — provide a lively narrative of the Alpac kraft-pulp mill environmental hearings in northeastern Alberta, complete with a photo of Ralph Klein, the province's environment minister at the time, giving the finger to Alpac's detractors. They've also constructed a manual for deciphering the expert testimony and arguments that industry and governments use when they want to cram a "profitable" project down the throats of the local citizenry. *Winning Back the Words* is a clearly written, exemplary piece of work that deserves the widest possible readership.

George N. Hood's **Against the Flow: Rafferty-Alameda and the**

**Politics of the Environment** (Fifth House, 232 pages, \$16.95 paper) is a different kettle of fish, only partly because its object of study, Saskatchewan's controversial Rafferty-Alameda project, is, according to the author, completely different from Alberta's Alpac. This book is unusual in that it is written (with clarity and thoroughness) from an insider's viewpoint: Hood was the project's director of planning and eventually its vice-president. More unusual still, Hood seems to be without an axe to grind. In short, I believe him when he says that much of the controversy was pointless — the result of vicious and generally bumbling bureaucratic infighting and factional politics between levels of government and various political parties, into which practical local concerns and high-minded environmental principles slipped like incompatible grades of gravel. *Against the Flow* is the work of an extremely gifted political scientist, and its portrait of Saskatchewan and its frequently strange and unique cultural and political milieu is of deeper import than its specific subject matter.

**Voices from the Odeyak** (NC Press, 230 pages, \$17.95 paper), by Michael Posluns, is about the epic voyage of a 25-foot hybrid-design canoe (built by Great Whale's Cree and Inuit peoples) from the shores of James Bay to Manhattan Island in 1990 to protest Hydro Quebec's latest lunatic scheme to screw up the lives of Quebec's Native peoples and permit the province's independence from Canada by joining the Northeast Power Grid. Remember that one? No?

Neither did I. Until I read this book, I thought the authorities for the Northeast Power Grid passed on Hydro Quebec's Great Whale Project because they didn't

need the electricity and because they were pressured by the Canadian federal government, not because a canoe landed on the shores of Manhattan Island and got its Warhol 15 from the New York media. Now I know better, and I'm, er, glad of it.

Posluns, in the latter part of his narrative, does give us the skinny on Hydro Quebec's utterly crazed scheme to commit cultural and economic genocide against Quebec's northern Natives, and that is a subject that doesn't deserve cynicism. But there's a certain unreality at the root of this book, and I think it has to do with the fact that there's no admission that the trip must have been one hell of a lark for those who were part of it. The whole *Odeyak* affair truly was a contemporary odyssey, and if it had been treated with just a tiny tinge of irony, its message — an important one — might have been communicated far more effectively. This is one of those books that would have had William Blake rolling his eyes and complaining about Urizen.

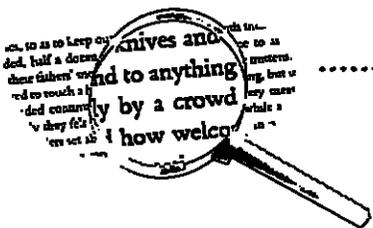
I probably should apologize for trying to deal with **Rogue Primate: An Exploration of Human Domestication** (Key Porter, 228 pages, \$21.95 paper) by the York University professor emeritus John A. Livingston, in the midst of a grab-bag review like this. His is a troubling and troubled book with vast intellectual ambitions and some startling insights about the resurgence of enthusiasm for Darwinian determinism that underlies the recent "triumph" of capitalist economics. Indeed, one of Livingston's primary targets is the entire Darwinian enterprise, which posits that life is a great battle in which only the aggressive and competition-crazed thrive, mainly through violence. Livingston argues

convincingly that this view is the result of self-serving, single-minded manipulation of the evidence; he offers alternate data and conceptual structures that suggest that bio-efficiency, cooperation, and nurturing are the truer base of natural behaviours, and that the neo-Darwinians are guilty of mainlining their own philosophical testosterone.

It is Livingston's nostalgia for the "state-of-nature" he redefines that gets him into trouble. Contradicting the rich wisdom his grasp of natural behaviours displays is a fundamental misanthropy concerning our species' self-domestication and its domestication of other species. His deep love for the hyper-alert, sense-infused experience wild animals live through occasionally causes him to choose sensorium over consciousness, and it leaves him, by default, on the edge of desiring the extermination of what would end up being roughly 98 percent of the planet's human population of six billion souls.

Still, Livingston confronts us with the intellectual quandary almost no one — environmentalists *not* excluded — has the courage to face: how to go on living on this planet beyond the next 50 or so years. He makes it abundantly clear that our present systems of governing ourselves won't take us much further without invoking a cataclysm, and he's sometimes extraordinarily clear about why. And, despite the flaws in his intellectual method, Livingston operates by the kind of full cosmology Blake demands for membership in the human miracle. *Rogue Primate* is, arguably, the most serious intellectual enterprise to be taken in this country since Jane Jacobs's *Systems of Survival*. It is one of those rare, *necessary* books, the kind that no serious intellectual can afford *not* to read. ○

# Writing Lives



ONE OF MY MOST MEMORABLE experiences was hearing Ira Bruce Nagel deliver a resounding critique of Gordon Haight's magisterial *George Eliot* while the biographer sat in the audience. The cordiality that existed between Nagel and Haight struck me at the time as some kind of ideal in civilized academic disputation. I'm tempted to see that courtesy as specifically Canadian even though the conference in question was international.

Now, however, after reading these three lives. I wonder about the danger of too much civility. for all three biographers seem to me too respectful, too ready to receive gratefully the information provided by their subjects. It must be noted, of course, that two of them are severely constrained by their publisher's format and by having subjects still in mid-career. A further constraint is that both Timothy Findley and Leonard Cohen are notorious charmers.

I am not recommending debunking, but a more vigorous interrogation of the data in order to push beyond surface readings to surprise and revelation. Perhaps the resistance to interpretation evidenced by the currency of the words "pathography" and "psychobabble" is inhibiting biographers, but the failure to interpret creates its own kind of erroneous interpretation.

Of the three, Carol Roberts's *Timothy Findley*

is the most adulatory, inviting her readers to settle in comfortably, like an audience, to hear Findley's tales. Early ones concern the trauma of the departure of Findley's father, first to the air force and then to service overseas. Her concluding story is of Findley's extravagant praise of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, and his performance of an impromptu ballet dance of Peter blissfully eating a radish. But writers' minds are full of images, and stories deserve to be read figuratively as well as literally. Is it frivolous to note that the story of a rabbit who heads straight for the forbidden garden in which his parent was killed and then makes a triumphant escape has thematic links with Findley's own stories?

The more sophisticated Ira B. Nagel starts off by skilfully expounding a paradigmatic scene from Leonard Cohen's *Death of a Lady's Man*. Cohen, he explains, finds his art imperilled when he is entrapped by beauty and responds by



**EARLE BIRNEY: A LIFE**

by Elspeth Cameron

Viking, 661 pages, \$35 cloth (ISBN 0 670 82874 2)

**LEONARD COHEN: A LIFE IN ART**

by Ira B. Nagel

ECW, 144 pages, \$14.95 paper (ISBN 1 55022 210 4)

**TIMOTHY FINDLEY: STORIES FROM A LIFE**

by Carol Roberts

ECW, 135 pages, \$14.95 paper (ISBN 1 55022 195 7)

Reviewed by Joan Givner

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seeking freedom and dismantling love so that he can sustain "the poignant immortality of my life in art." The scene he selects is of the man waking beside a woman as beautiful as Lady Hamilton and declaring that moment of sexual fulfilment "the end of my life in art."

The reference to Emma Hamilton evokes the 1941 film *That Hamilton Woman*, in which Vivien Leigh was brilliantly photographed by Rudolph Maté. We learn a few pages later that Cohen's father was an avid cameraman who constantly filmed his chil-

the most ambitious of these works. Her subject's career is complete, she had access to one of the most complete personal archives in existence, and she has written a full-scale biography bearing all the hallmarks of her distinguished work. She controls and orders the staggering diversity of materials, grounds it firmly in a cultural background, integrates Birney's literary works, and forges everything into a gracefully written account.

Her integration of Birney's 850-page doctoral dissertation on Chaucer into

of gargantuan appetite, boundless sexual energy, goat-like lechery, and enormous physical equipment. But sexual promiscuity is rarely about lust and prowess.

Birney's early sexual experiences are telling. At a tender age, the bookworm gained status among his classmates by being beaten for circulating his sketch of a couple having sex under a tree. He writes of masturbating in a ditch as he imagines ladies' underwear ads and sees the "mountainous" bare legs of "Dumb Annie," a berry picker. (Mountainous?) We learn that later he lost his fiancée to a rival, slipped without ardour into a marriage of convenience, and never found a fulfilling relationship with a woman. The inscription of his relationships in letters and literary works, however, proved more satisfying. There is a complexity of issues here that, if probed, would render Birney's endless philandering less tiresome and exploitative and more sympathetic.

The best biographers have blind spots that sometimes arise from the difficulty of understanding across gender lines. There is for me a slight jarring when I read a biography of a man written by a woman and vice versa, rather similar to that startling moment when a male foreign leader is seen on a television screen and his words are spoken by a female translator. The *sine qua non* of biography is the choice of a compatible subject, for the biographer's subject is the equivalent of the novelist's fictional representative.

Of these three biographers, Nagel is the one whose compatibility with the subject is most successful. A full-scale biography by Nagel of Leonard Cohen would be something worth waiting for. ○



EARLE BIRNEY

LEONARD COHEN



TIMOTHY FINDLEY

ELIZABETH FERYN

dren. It seems to me that Cohen (conditioned as a child film star) was thus set up for the typically female tension between being a work of art and producing one, which has paralysed so many women writers — a conflict Cohen lessens by becoming a bal-ladeer. Nagel traces Cohen through his various metamorphoses to his latest one in Los Angeles, close to his Zen master and to Hollywood. The word "posturing" creeps in from time to time but Nagel treads lightly on that subject.

Elsbeth Cameron's *Earle Birney* is

her portrait of his developing character exemplifies her intelligent procedure. She explains Birney's long preoccupation with Chaucer's irony as, *inter alia*, an attempt to come to terms with the darker side of himself and "the way crevasses seemed to open up between different sides of himself."

I wish that she had applied the same kind of interpretive skill to Birney's sexuality. But while she lists the endless marital infidelities, she ultimately backs off, allowing Birney and others to speak on the subject and leave the impression



staring at the ice and the dark water. "Then I understood."

*Local Colour* is less successful, perhaps because the intention is more ambitious. The editor Carol Martin has gathered some witty, moving, intriguing, and revealing extracts to present the best travel writing about Canada in the past 30 years. But, as a whole, the book lacks the serendipity of truly memorable journeys.

Twenty-four contributors roam far in miles and imagination to report their experience of the country: Michael Poole paddles his canoe up the Inside Passage to a dinner with a lonely prawn fisherman in Loughborough Inlet.

Minnie Aodla Freeman shares her experience as an Inuit girl arriving for the first time in Ottawa in 1957.

No quibbles about regional representation, but isn't something missing in an exploration of Canada without Toronto, the city that loves itself and that the rest of Canada loves to despise? Two pieces on the railway, but no mention of the Trans-Canada Highway, one of the country's last drawstrings, now reduced to a thin grey line with potholes. Both the road and the city are arguably among the most powerful images of the country we call Canada.

The major problem with *Local Colour* is that all but four of the 24

contributions are extracts from books. Extracts don't always come off well in anthologies if they are too much alike in pace and voice. However important the sights seen, the effect becomes the same as climbing on and off a tour bus when what you really wanted to do was observe how the locals drink coffee. But it is a treat to go from tramping around Writing on Stone Park to working with a survey team cleaning the cut line of the 49th parallel in British Columbia — all in the same book.

*Writing Away* and *Local Colour* both show the strength of Canadian travel writing today — and there's no reason not to expect more. O

## Stock Footage

.....  
**BROTHER FRANK'S  
GOSPEL HOUR**  
by W. P. Kinsella

HarperCollins, 190 pages, \$23 cloth (ISBN 0 00 224368 7)

Reviewed by Janice Kulyk Keefer

LET'S BEGIN BY CONCEDED that W. P. Kinsella's "Indians" are constructs, a latter-day version, perhaps, of William Henry Drummond's *habitants*. These constructs — and the phenomenon of Silas Ermineskin as Kinsella's writerly alter ego in "red-face" — will be found unconvincing or offensive by some readers, and entertaining by others. Yet whether or not we look to literature for verisimilitude and representational transparency (and both fans and foes of Kinsella may well profess to do so), one thing readers might expect to find in any book of fiction for which we're asked to plunk down a hard-

earned \$23 is prose that explores its chosen territory, offering perceptions that surprise or startle us into acknowledging how much we don't know or won't admit about others and ourselves.

For this reader, the initial problem with this latest of Kinsella's books of "Indian" stories is that its fictions are complacent rather than exploratory; they work on the principle of what Viktor Shklovsky called "the algebraization of perception" and can't escape the limitations of formula fiction: stale jokes, predictable anecdotes, generic tricks. "Been there: read that," the reader says, not just at the end but often after the first page of story after story, whether it is the flat-footed rewrite of *Rashomon*, "Conflicting Statements," or the upbeat, feel-good machinations of "Dream-Catcher" and "The Rain Birds" — machinations that one assumes are meant to satisfy the



W. P. Kinsella

stipulations of some caricature of the politically correct reader. Those genuinely concerned with questions of gender, race, and class, with the inequities of contemporary Canadian society and the problematic politics of representation, will be left not just unamused by *Brother Frank's Gospel Hour*, but actively irritated.

The stories in this volume vary from True (North) Romance ("Turbulence"), in which a hardened older man finds true love and a reason for living, to a singularly unmagical tale of the supernatural, "George the Cat," in which the love between a cosmetically challenged old-married-couple is confirmed. Some — notably "Ice Man" — feature child protagonists who all too egregiously win the day over the obstacles to success that the adult world has erected against them.

Yet in the majority of these fictions, the writing simply doesn't repay the effort of reading. There are constant lapses in sheer mechanics; for example, while Silas Ermineskin most often employs an updated version of the "How!" or "Bite-um-No-see-um" Indianese of a previous era, in this case an idiom marked by the misconjugation of the present tense, at certain times he "slips" into a more exalted register, showing himself to have mastered the use of the pluperfect, and producing grandiloquent descriptions of the natural world.

One particularly grating habit of Kinsella's is to use his stories as platforms to vent politically charged spleen: "One of the problems of Indians getting more involved in the everyday world is that they lose their sense of humour," Silas Ermineskin observes; "the smaller the minority, the louder they whine." He even gets in a crack about Indian writers who think they should get published not because they're good, but merely because

they're Indian. Yet if Kinsella betrays his anxiety about the competition, he clings all the more stubbornly to his stock-in-trade. While his "Indians" may have become more "enterprising," his female characters are churned out in the same phallo-tedious mode: with few exceptions they are either 1) old, sexless, and venerable, or 2) young, nubile, and (take your pick) vulnerable or sexually predatory. His "non-traditional" women are cardboard figures — Constable Bobrowski, Bedelia the activist — who could just as well be male for all the trouble Kinsella takes in portraying them. The one story that achieves a degree of substance and a certain level of complexity, "Brother Frank's Gospel Hour," makes the rest of the fictions seem even more tired and more predictable in retrospect.

These latest stories by Kinsella are designed to contain, in the words of his testosterone-toting creation Frank Fencepost "all things that make people feel good [; they are] just waiting to make you happy." Some readers may find enjoyment in a character who wants to "get [him] a program called macSperm, help [him] keep track of all the rug rats [he's] fathered," and whose "motto is 'A Fencepost in every oven.'" For those readers whose happiness lies in encountering sophisticated and surprising literary texts, ones in which stereotypes are rattled and prejudices deconstructed with illuminating wit and intelligence, I'd recommend, among a host of other Native writers, Thomas King. In fact, I'd urge diehard Kinsella fans to do themselves a favour and pick up any of King's fictions. They might find themselves experiencing a change of heart — and aesthetic. After which, to adapt that old, but not inedible chestnut, "How will you keep 'em down on the Hobbema Reserve, now that they've seen Medicine River?" O

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# Intimate Strangers

**W**HEN HIS LOVER suggests she may see beneath his smooth veneer, the con-man narrator of Don Bailey's "Stolen Dreams" suddenly bristles: "The siren of my inner security system screamed a warning."

"Stolen Dreams" is the most outstanding story in the Winnipeg author's uneven collection *Window Dressing*, a

---

## WINDOW DRESSING

By Don Bailey

Oberon, 117 pages, \$23.95 cloth, \$11.95 paper  
(ISBN 0 88750 961 4 cloth, 0 88750 962 2 paper)

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## EVIL EYE

By Ann Diamond

Vehicule, 129 pages, \$12.95 paper (ISBN 1 55065 043 2)

Reviewed by Mary Frances Hill

celebration of those moments when the alarm sounds, jolting awake the psyche of lonely, wounded men. Bailey's protagonists are isolated, attentive, accustomed to being taken for granted, and frightened. Struggling to regain an identity lost in more secure past lives, they are "alone and of that uncertain age that's neither young nor old." They are surprised to find genuine warmth inside them, perhaps because it can be shed so effortlessly. After a rare intimate act, the narrator of "Stolen Dreams" reminisces: "Usually for me the act of sexual union is a pleasant distraction from some business problem that has caused certain muscles in my body to knot up."

Bailey writes eloquently of the tomb of loss and silence surrounding divorce — "I hunger for another chance to embrace this intimate stranger I once called

wife" — and of parenthood, death, and robotic encounters with strangers. Bailey's memoir-like narrative is his finest instrument. His narrators' slow resurrections from defensiveness into intimate social life are strangely compelling. In "Are You Happy?" a man relating well to his teenage nephew realizes he has flourished "in a land where speech and silence have equal validity. Unfortunately, this can leave you stranded, in voiceless isolation." But it's as if Bailey does not trust the power in his own narration: the same story begins to slide into continuous blocks of dialogue, leaving this reader yearning for more of Bailey's characters' secluded thoughts.

The stories in Ann Diamond's *Evil Eye*, the Montreal writer's second collection of short fiction, portray the outsider as the woman who has dropped her shield and chooses to take up her vantage point on the periphery of life.

Diamond's uncluttered language reveals the chill inherent in keeping one's eyes — and heart — stationed on the borders of experience. And the stories run a gamut of intensity: a Buddhist monk escapes the insanity of his bombed city for Los Angeles, finding there his own debauchery and cynicism. While her homeland is being invaded, a wronged woman finds an odd new power as the carrier of a hideous, animated wound and the seed of a goat-boy's offspring. Diamond carries over the dispassionate voice that feeds the tales of mythic and apocalyptic life into the gentler reflections of a lonesome adolescent girl in "Roads to Freedom," and also works it into the lives of the women



Don  
Bailey



Ann  
Diamond

GEORGE ISHERWOOD

burdened under the weight of painful relationships in "Head of Hair" and "The Chain."

Whether they fight their battles in the fantastic or realistic world, Diamond's women seem to use their involvement with brutish, insensitive men as acts of defiance. But when the world stops paying attention, they find a new isolation and fragility. In "Silent Callers," the narrator, looking for power in an otherwise humiliating affair, reflects on the ghosts of an old brothel:

Even after death sometimes they go on being present, still fading. I reflect on that fact often, and it disgusts me: that a woman is doomed to such a futile delicacy, like a wallpaper design or a voice you only half hear as you're falling off into a dream. It seems infuriating that after a lifetime a woman leaves so little trace of herself — no real monument, nothing you might call concrete.

*Evil Eye* is not a relaxing read. It's easy to become absorbed in Diamond's simple style only to be caught off guard by her next move, to find yourself at once too timid and too excited to turn the page. ○



broadcast executive, and Arthur J. Cordell, an economist concerned with information technology. Yalnizyan identifies the global mobility of capital, not fluctuations in the domestic economic cycle, as the main cause of unemployment and the lack of job security. The revision of Canada's welfare state "serves at the altar of deficit reduction," giving rise to an emphasis on employment at a time when access to it becomes more and more difficult. Training, or retraining, remains the catchword, but where are the jobs for which people are urged to train? The author proposes as solutions the more equitable distribution of wealth, the reorganizing of budget priorities, a progressive tax system for personal and corporate income, keeping Canadian-made savings at home, statutory leave

for educational upgrading, and a national strategy for child care.

Ide and Cordell point out that 70 per cent of Canada's working population is now engaged in the service sector, that the disparity in income between society's haves and have-nots has increased, and that even an economic recovery will not bring back the thousands of jobs already lost. The central activity of contemporary society is the constant improvement of technology (of which the latest manifestation is the information highway) that tends to result in fewer people working in standard employment, loss of tax revenue, and sociological and moral decline. Enlightened self-interest suggests that some portion of productivity gains arising from the use of the new tools should be taxed to support the social infrastructure, for exam-

ple health care and basic income levels.

It is no disrespect to the authors of both books to argue that they have found it much easier to diagnose the patient's condition than to prescribe an efficacious, acceptable cure. Although the remedies they offer may provide some amelioration, what is also needed is the development of a wartime cooperative spirit in which the national effort, under inspired leadership, is directed against the non-military but no less hostile forces of inflation and unemployment, and in which the acceptance of temporary sacrifice and restriction of individual freedom is seen as a necessary price to pay until the final battle is won. A naïve view perhaps, but the economic dilemma poses a collective crisis that we must all have the discipline to overcome. O

## Final Takes

.....  
**GREAT SCOTT!**  
**The Best of Jay Scott's Movie Reviews**  
 by Jay Scott

McClelland & Stewart, 341 pages, \$19.95 paper  
 (ISBN 0 7710 3365 6)

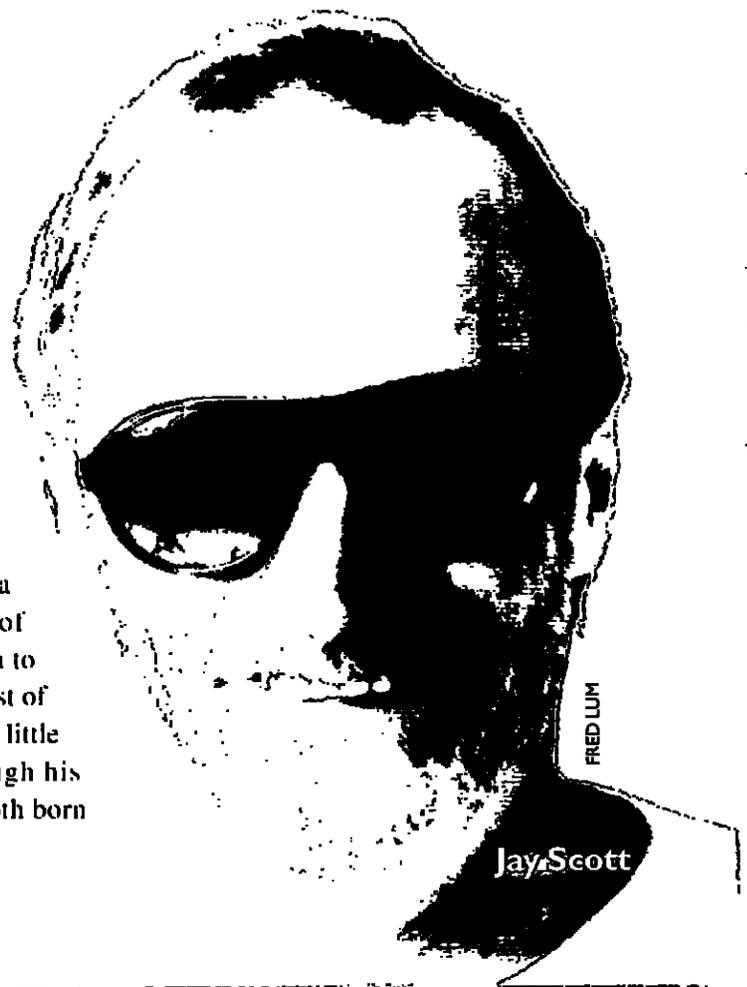
Reviewed by George Kaufman

JAY SCOTT WAS A UNIQUE character on the Canadian journalistic scene; in fact, he was one of those rare characters who seemed to have no difficulty existing as a living contradiction.

He wrote movie reviews for the stuffy, often even snooty, *Globe and Mail*, and was both highly respected among film enthusiasts and widely read by regular moviegoers. He was quietly flamboyant; only he could have bal-

anced a life as a motorcycle-riding gay man with the prestigious writing post at the *Globe*.

Though I never met him, I think I was typical of many who nonetheless felt a personal sense of loss when he died a year ago at the age of 43. I felt a connection to him through the oddest of ties, revealed little by little over the years through his columns: we were both born



in Nebraska, had come to Canada to work in journalism, loved movies and wrote about them, and agreed on undervalued film treasures such as *The Big Fix* and *Something Wild*. I always felt a special affinity with his writings, but that was part of his talent — his ability to make many readers feel that bond.

I mention all this to convey my mixed emotions on receiving a copy of this new collection of his reviews. As much as I had enjoyed reading Scott's reviews as they were published, would this book prove a well-intentioned, but dated, tribute to his craft?

I needn't have worried. Scott's articles are as sparkling now as ever — entertaining, thought-provoking, informative, amusing — with the same flair that a good movie has for taking a familiar formula and surprising us with some new twists and fresh ideas.

Scott has the gift of writing intelligent, informed articles without either writing down to the reader or engaging in intellectual grandstanding (though, like all good writers, he couldn't resist going over the top a few times). The typical Jay Scott review was so full of literary allusions and references to other films that, by the end, knowledgeable readers knew not only what Scott thought of it, but whether they would want to see it, too.

*Great Scott!* is especially useful for the video generation. Just glancing through it when it first arrived, for example, I quickly got caught up in reviews of half a dozen movies that I had forgotten, but immediately put on my list of must-rents to see again.

Scott's inventive, playful way with words makes this book a pleasure to dive into. A serious writer, he was still never above throwing in a line to make

us think and smile at the same time. Talking of John Huston's devilishly delightful gangster film *Prizzi's Honor*, for example, Scott sums up Kathleen Turner's role as the mysterious Irene Walker: "She's got a secret like Nevada's got sand." In a few uncanny lines, he compares Clint Eastwood's dark portrayal of William Munny in *Unforgiven* to earlier roles like Harry Callahan (in *Dirty Harry*) and the Man With No Name (in the spaghetti westerns):

But Munny transcends his precedents to become a truly tragic figure, a country-western combination of Lear and Richard III. Gaunt, grim, guilt-ridden — but still deadly, with a psychotic streak no less deep because it has run silent for years — Munny is a memorable sinner/saint, a character so complex his actions are difficult to condone or condemn.

Just before Scott's death, he ended a review of *Jurassic Park* with a disturbing condemnation of modern movie-making:

Some day, scientists will pick through the fossilized remains of Hollywood. They will find *Jurassic Park*. They will screen it. They will use it to reconstruct life eons ago, when directors and producers roamed, if not ruled, the earth. Citing the film as evidence, the scientists will release their conclusion: Movies died out because they got too big for their pea-sized brains. The scientists will have a name for the extinct species: Cinesaurus.

Great Scott, indeed. ○

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# Out in the World

THE NEW WRITERS OF Canadian short fiction bring new voices, new experiences, new locales, and a new level of sophistication to the genre. A Canadian short story can no longer be relied upon to explore the difficulties of growing up on the Prairies or in a small Ontario town. Canadian short-story writers, it seems, have become citizens of the world and

---

## THE COCK'S EGG

by Rosemary Nixon

NeWest, 167 pages, \$12.95 paper (ISBN 0 920897 51 7)

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## CITY OF ORPHANS

by Patricia Robertson

The Porcupine's Quill, 160 pages, \$12.95 paper (ISBN 0 88984 176 4)

Reviewed by Diane Schoemperlen

their writing is just as likely to reflect the influence of Isabel Allende or Gabriel García Márquez as of W. O. Mitchell or Alice Munro.

The 19 stories in Rosemary Nixon's second collection, *The Cock's Egg*, are stories of Canadians living in Zaire, where Nixon herself lived for two years, teaching history and English as a second language. The first story, "From the Inside Out," is powerful and startling, an excellent indicator of what lies ahead for the reader. The story begins: "Frieda counts off what happened the first five weeks. One. Her tampons blew up. In this humidity their bodies mushroomed, spread, until they popped the confines of their pink plastic shells ...." Nixon goes on to tell the story of Frieda, a childless Canadian woman living in Zaire with her husband, Linford, who travels to villages

throughout the district giving seminars to the Zairians: "According to Linford, people walk for days to hear him lecture on 'The Successful Introduction and Evaluation of Improved Manioc Strains.'" Sometimes he has to stay away overnight. Alone, Frieda tries to make the villagers understand that she doesn't have a baby because she doesn't want one. She leafs through the *Purity Cookbook* she brought with her from Calgary: "Stuffed Pork Tenderloin Garnished with Apple Rings. Veal Marsala. Oyster Scallop. She and Linford saw meat at the market once. Something indistinguishable. Hard and hairy. Meat here is masculine ...."

The clash of Canadian and Zairian cultures is a central theme throughout the collection. Nixon does not presume to understand Zaire — rather, she presents it as a foreigner would experience it, a culture full of mystery, magic, and witchcraft. Throughout the stories, the witchcraft of the cock's egg recurs: if you are lucky enough to find one, it will absorb all your bad luck and bring you your heart's desire. In the story "A Chameleon in the Garden," a Zairian woman living with a Canadian family in Calgary is told that there is no witchcraft in Canada. In Canada the only important rooster is the green one on the Kellogg's Corn Flakes box.

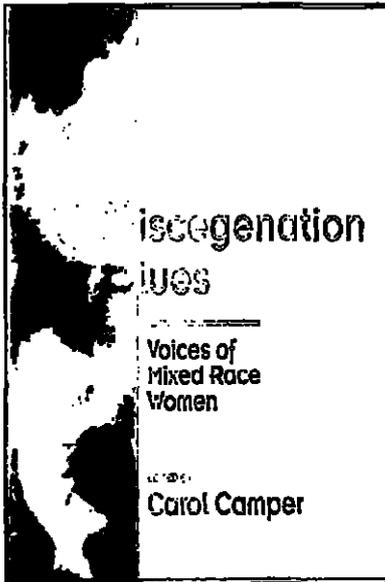
Nixon's stories are fresh and quick, sharp and rich in dazzling visual imagery. Her language is simple but frequently startling, particularly in her descriptions of the Zairian landscape: "Outside, the land was purple darkness. The heavens, hot and in motion, like a woman changing trains." Nixon takes



the reader to another world, where anything is possible and magic is as much a part of everyday reality as the hot sun in the white sky.

Patricia Robertson also brings an international perspective to her debut collection of short fiction, *City of Orphans*. She has travelled widely, and spent three and a half years living in Spain, working as a bilingual secretary in Madrid and as an English teacher in the Canary Islands. Here too are foreign settings: the Mediterranean, Poland, Norway, 14th-century Arabia. Even the unspecified, presumably Canadian settings are suffused with the exotic. Here too are elements of magic realism reminiscent of Latin American writers. In "Arabian Snow," for instance, what begins as the "ordinary" story of a woman named Gabriela who owns a bakery, marries a painter, and has a baby named Minna becomes a fluid interplay between this reality and the dream world of a 14th-century Norwegian princess who has been traded to an Arabian nobleman. In this story and others, it is not clear whether Robertson's characters are dreaming — or going insane.

Robertson's stories are quiet and thoughtful, each sentence honed to a level of intense perfection that seems eventually to suck the energy out of the collection. These stories are very earnest and should be haunting, but they're not: instead they fade under the weight of the psychological insight they are forced to bear. ○



## Miscegenation Blues

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Edited by Carol Camper

*Miscegenation Blues: Voices of Mixed Race Women* is a stunning and long awaited collection of some of the most poignant writing by more than forty women of mixed racial heritage.

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## Up from Liberalism

**A**LL RIGHT, LET'S REDEFINE Western liberalism. Is it open-mindedness or progressive-ness? No, deconstruct it just right, and it looks like racism, conservatism, and most of the other unattractive isms out there.

Sorry, but there is a sense of cranky, righteous indignation here (strongest in *Showing Grit*, muted to a discreet intellectual hum in *Territories of Difference*) that raises the hackles of this (mainstream, with some ethnic credentials) critic. These three books crusade — against historically embedded stereotyping and other injustices, against the well-meaning but unconsciously racist liberalism of the European colonizers and their descendants.

They crusade, too, against their mainstream readers. As they rethink cultural identity and history, they slip into what Sara Suleri in *Territories of Difference* terms "the rhetoric of 'us' and 'them.'" They separate the world into "us," the marginalized and disenfranchised, and

"them," the postcolonialist liberals.

One of the three books fits Italo Calvino's category of Books Made For Purposes Other Than Reading: the second edition of *Showing Grit*, a book-long essay explaining why the Broadway musical *Show Boat* should never have been revived and performed in Toronto. M. Nourbese Philip, a Caribbean-born Torontonion, may be a prize-winning poet and an astute social critic, but *Showing Grit*, resonating with outrage and frustration, reads like a too-long letter to the editor. "What will it take to make those with the privilege of race, skin colour, class and gender — rich white men — realize what is at stake here?" she asks. More than *Showing Grit*, which assumes that its reader has a Torontonion's knowledge of the controversy, and a partisan's perspective.

Philip has a point about *Show Boat*, and she belabours it in this three-part argument in prose and prose-poem. She examines the social and historical contexts that produced slavery, racial dis-

.....

### SHOWING GRIT: SHOWBOATING NORTH OF THE 44TH PARALLEL

by M. Nourbese Philip

Poiv Publications, 177 pages, \$20 paper (ISBN 09695141 1 5)

### THE RAFT OF THE MEDUSA: FIVE VOICES ON COLONIES, NATIONS AND HISTORIES

edited by Jocelyne Doray  
and Julian Samuel

Black Rose, 132 pages, \$38.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper  
(ISBN 1 895431 77 8 cloth, 1 895431 76 X paper)

### TERRITORIES OF DIFFERENCE

edited by Renee Baert

Walker Philips Gallery, 189 pages, \$15 paper (ISBN 0920159 48 6)

Reviewed by Sheryl Halpern

crimination, and *Show Boat* the novel and the Broadway show. She wonders why the revival came to Canada (she feels that its premiere, a year after the Yonge Street riots, was not a coincidence). It is an attempt at a fair-minded treatment of all the issues involved — but it goes on and on.

So does *Show Boat*. Despite the protests, it became a box-office hit, and even Philip admits she's tempted to see it. As consolation, there's a "morality play."

## Classifieds

ECW Press regrets that a key section of an ad for a recent book on Northrop Frye was taken without attribution from John Ayre's entry on Northrop Frye in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. ECW Press apologizes to John Ayre and to McClelland and Stewart for its unauthorized use of copyrighted material.

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### Solution for Acrostic #64

"Favour is deceitful and beauty is vain, Ursula. She was Sarah Pyatt and she married Fred Proctor. He was one of your wicked, fascinating men. After she married him he gave up being fascinating, but he kept on being wicked."

At the Altar, L. M. Montgomery (M & S)

titled *The Redemption of Al Bumen*, about a white impresario who is confronted by five Black women and ends up with egg on his face. (Yes, but will a "rich white man" buy a copy of *Showing Grit* and read this?)

Jocelyne Duray and Julian Samuel's *The Raft of the Medusa* is less angry, and less accessible: again, too much is assumed. The title piece, a transcript of Samuel's documentary film, needs a meaty introduction and thumbnail descriptions of the speakers. The script seems to start *in medias res*, and it takes a while for the reader to discover that the participants are "five intellectuals working in five different locations," speaking not to each other but to an interviewer, and brought together by film editing. The title, by the way, refers to a 19th-century painting (de-

scribed as "a critique of the perspective the West has of world misery") by Théodore Géricault.

The five speakers—Amin Maalouf, Thierry Hentsch, Sara Suleri, Ackbar Abbas, and, again, Philip—want to revise the Eurocentric view of history, and each has a different spin. Maalouf, for example, remarks on the European fear of Islam; Suleri discusses the formation of Pakistan; Abbas talks about Hong Kong, a place with no past and a Chinese future. Hentsch brings in Marx, and history as myth; Philip defines her role as a subverter of European history.

There's no shortage of thought-provoking material about relations between the colonizers, the colonized, language, and power. Still, five monologues stitched together make a disjointed cross-cultural conversation: the insights turn into odd *non sequiturs*. A pity—you might lose track, and miss Maalouf's extraordinary proclamation of eclectic humanism:

The centre is man ... I have the right to be, at the same time, Christian, Moslem, Jewish, Buddhist. I have the right to borrow from all religions, from all ideologies ... And I don't need a label ....

Tied to *The Raft of the Medusa* are two short related pieces. One, an interview with the Ottawa writer Marwan Hassan, includes comments on postcolonialism, racism, and Canadian identity, and the mission of Robertson Davies. The other, by Charles Acland, reinterprets the Dracula myth (the Count as colonialist spectre, the immigrant as vampire).

*Territories of Difference*, a collection of essays that began with two Banff

Centre art programs on borders and cultural differences, is the most scholarly and dispassionate of the three—and probably destined for graduate reading lists. Though the postcolonialist jargon is still thick on the pages, *Territories of Difference* offers more of the multi-layered, multicultural approach that *The Raft of the Medusa* tries for and *Showing Grit* misses.

Renee Baert's introduction offers a thoughtful overview of the issues of differences, borders, and history, and each piece takes a different approach to difference and identity.

Loretta Todd discusses a film about the Navajo, showing where art and anthropology become invasive, and Norbert Ruebsaat and Gwaganad (Diane Brown) collaborate on a discussion of Haida customs that is not a standard anthropological interview.

Philip (again), in a poem-cum-dialogue titled "Looking for Livingstone," confronts the famous Livingstone-I-presume in Africa ("You're new here, aren't you?" she asks him), while Cameron Bailey critiques Dany Laferrière's racy parody of racist stereotypes, *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer*, and describes what gets lost (on purpose) in translation.

Monika Kin Gagnon links 19th-century studies on hysterics to modern views on AIDS and sexuality, and Kim Sawchuk returns a package of comfortable assumptions about the global market to its corporate senders. There are perceptive notes on two related art exhibits, too.

Should you read these books? If you're a liberal and don't mind feeling uncomfortable—simultaneously addressed and antagonized—read away. At least you'll know what is being said about you. ○

*'One of those splendid social histories which come riding down the pike, on a white horse, once in a generation.'* June Callwood

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University of Toronto Press

## Command Decisions

**T**HIS LONG-AWAITED THIRD volume of the Royal Canadian Air Force official history takes us overseas during the Second World War, where brave fighter pilots defend the mother country in the Battle of Britain and heroic bomber crews carry the attack to Germany itself.

First, to end the suspense: *The Crucible of War, 1939-1945* supports Brian and Terence McKenna's "The Valour and the Horror" — the 1992 CBC-TV mini-series that sparked a lawsuit by outraged air force veterans, who claimed it slighted their wartime role and sullied the memory of almost 10,000 RCAF personnel killed while serving with Bomber Command.

Bombing certainly slowed the rate of expansion of the German economy, established a "Second Front" long before D-Day, and forced Germany to devote considerable manpower to air defence. But it did not destroy the German manufacturing industry nor the morale of the civilian population. "In a pre-nu-

clear war," argue the authors of *The Crucible of War*.

airpower alone could not strike a decisive blow, and postwar analysis showed clearly that the damage inflicted on the German war economy was never as great as hoped (and believed) at the time.

That conclusion comes after 10 years of scholarly research and insightful analysis, and is supported by more than 1,000 footnotes in the 344-page bomber war section alone. End of controversy? Probably not, for historical research and analysis usually pale before the combined onslaught of memory and pride.

In addition to dealing with the bomber war, this massive 1,096-page book contains lengthy sections on air policy, the fighter war, the maritime air war, and the air-transport war. Its strengths are many. The authors provide detailed technical information on radar operations of both Allied and German air forces. William R. Constable has drawn some terrific maps.

.....

### THE CRUCIBLE OF WAR 1939-1945: THE OFFICIAL HISTORY OF THE ROYAL CANADIAN AIR FORCE, VOLUME III

by Brereton Greenhous,  
Stephen J. Harris, William C. Johnston  
and William G.P. Rawling

University of Toronto Press. 1,096 pages. \$50 cloth  
(ISBN 0 8020 0574 8)

Reviewed by Robert M. Stamp

Superb photographs often carry the narrative better than the text, although the reproductions are disappointing.

Whether dealing with bombers, fighters, or radar, however, the emphasis remains on policy. "Our mandate was to prepare an institutional history of the Royal Canadian Air Force," declare the authors, all historians with the Department of National Defence in Ottawa. Readers are subjected to countless administrative conflicts — squabbles between air force chiefs and cabinet ministers, inter-service rivalries, and the issue of "Canadianization" in the face of British military colonialism.

Few action accounts sully the text. Pilot Officer A.G. Grant's bombing of Italian beaches in August 1943 and

Flight Lieutenant Richard Audet's downing of five enemy aircraft on a single sortie in December 1944 seem like intrusions in an otherwise desk-bound administrative history. The dominant view comes not from the pilot's seat or the gunner's turret. *The Crucible of War* is "desk-top" history at its finest.

Not that we want a repeat of *The RCAF Overseas*, a three-volume study from the 1940s that overglorified the "deeds of gallantry performed by Canada's sons in the face of the enemy." But in its concern for desk-top administrivia, *The Crucible of War* misses the opportunity to move military history forward into a more all-encompassing socio-cultural approach to chronicling the lives of armed forces personnel during wartime.

The book doesn't deal with the majority of the 93,844 Canadian air force personnel who served overseas during the Second World War — since they served

in RAF rather than RCAF squadrons. It devotes just three pages to the downed RCAF flyers in POW camps. It de-emphasizes non-flying personnel, though 337 lost their lives in the line of duty. It ignores the off-duty life of Canadian airmen and their impact on the English civilian population. How many brawls outside village pubs? How many unwanted pregnancies? How many war brides?

Most appalling is the treatment of the RCAF's Women's Division. No listing in the index, and only one paragraph mentioning the "567 female officers and 372 other ranks" (why not say 939 women?) at No 6 Group Headquarters at Allerton Park. Why so little space devoted to these women who, the authors grudgingly admit, "eventually played a significant and direct role in the operational life of RCAF bases and stations"? It's the patriarchy at work: "In our opinion, though their contributions as indi-

viduals were as great as those of men doing identical or similar work, their numbers were relatively small and their overall impact on the service not great."

Women taxpayers who feel cheated should consult Shirley Render's recent book, *No Place for a Lady: The Story of Canadian Women Pilots 1928-1992*. Many women with pilots' licences were grounded in desk jobs with the RCAF throughout the Second World War. Not till 1980 did the first women fly operationally for the Canadian Armed Forces. Feminist readers of *The Crucible of War* may wish to add up the man-hours (not "person-hours") of the four authors and their research and administrative assistants over the past 10 years, then estimate the total cost to the Department of National Defence and to Canada's taxpayers. (Results may be faxed to the National Action Committee on the Status of Women.) ○

## Heroic Quests

EIRIKSDOTTIR

by Joan Clark

Macmillan, 371 pages, \$24.95 cloth (ISBN 0 7715 9009 1)

Reviewed by Eva Tihanyi

JOAN CLARK'S SECOND ADULT novel is subtitled *A Tale of Dreams and Luck*, which it most certainly is. Echoing elements of a long Norse saga, it uses myth, folklore, dream imagery, and verse to help tell the story of Freydis Eiriksdottir, the illegitimate daughter of Eirik the Red, and her expedition in 1015 to Leifsbudir, the Viking outpost in Newfoundland established by her brother Leif Eiriksson. Fuelled by

Leif's stories of abundance, his offer to lend her his ship, and her own overwhelming desire to build a ship of her own while at the outpost, Freydis sets sail in quest of what she hopes will be her good fortune.

From the outset there is tension between the Greenlanders and Icelanders who take part in the expedition, and it is this uneasiness that Clark slowly builds to a grisly climax. Unfortunately, this construction takes far too long, and unless readers are interested in Viking habits, customs, dress, and genealogy (well researched as these are), they will likely find themselves tempted to shut the book halfway through — which would be a shame, considering the im-



KATIM ROBERTSON

### Joan Clark

pact of the last chapters.

Freydis herself is anything but dull. She is shrewd, cunning, outspoken, lusty, treacherous, stubborn, aggres-

sive — all to a degree too great to benefit her in the end. During the expedition, her leadership abilities are compared favourably to those of her brother, and although she is feared and disliked, she commands attention. Her husband, an excellent hunter but a weak man, pales beside her, and is no match for her potent ambition and her even more potent will. She is, without a doubt, in charge. The only other character who comes even remotely close to her strength of self is the thrall Ulfar, whose quiet, just, observant nature serves as a powerful contrast to not only Freydis but the whole animalistic crew.

The novel takes place during the advent of Christianity — Leif and Ulfar are both converts while Freydis is adamantly opposed to the new religion and wants “the old gods” — and Freydis is portrayed as one of the last of a dying breed: the rapacious conqueror, the warrior Viking. Her story is really the story of the end of a culture and how such ends come for many reasons, in many ways. Clark’s depiction, near the end of the book, of Paradise and the attendant soul-numbing that comes with achieving it could well serve as a cautionary tract for anyone who thinks a completely stress-free life is a happy one.

Despite its overall plodding style, *Eiriksdottir* — if one can stick with it to the end — leaves one slightly startled, as if one had been listening to a long and intricate tale unfolded gradually over a hundred winter nights, a haunting tale about fate and folly, and the lure and the danger of Paradise; here is a meditation on the nature of the human spirit, its courage and treachery, its quest for material wealth and sensory adventure, but above all, its quest for the meaning of its own self. ○

## Once Upon a Time

**I** MET HELEN CREIGHTON once, when I interviewed her about people she had known who featured in my master’s thesis in folklore. Near the end of the visit, I asked her to sign my copy of her autobiography, *A Life in Folklore*. As she did, she asked if I intended to have a life in folklore too. I replied that I would if I could find a job when I graduated. She was too polite to respond to this, but the look that flickered across her face showed plainly that she would never have allowed such a paltry consideration to stand in her way.

Nor did she. Without position at a university or archive, Helen Creighton collected folklore, mainly in Nova Scotia, for most of this century. Unencumbered by academic theories, she kept her mind open and collected everything: not only the songs that interested her, but folk cures, beliefs, and stories as well. *A Folk Tale Journey through the Maritimes* is a posthumously produced collection of 74 stories from all three Maritime provinces edited by Ronald Caplan, editor of *Cape Breton’s Magazine*, and the Saskatchewan folklorist Michael Taft. Creighton’s accompanying notes are probably rougher than she would have liked, but do convey a sense of the people who gave her these tales and the conditions in which they were collected: recording equipment, for instance, was once heavy enough to require a wheelbarrow to move it around.

Most of these stories are what folklorists call, with a straight face, “ordinary folk-tales,” peopled with giants, kings, magic swords, talking animals, and kindly simpletons who marry kings’ daughters. Anyone who thought such tales belonged only to Europe is in for a

surprise. In their introduction, Caplan and Taft assert that these stories are “not the tales found in modern-day children’s books” nor do they resemble older literary reworkings such as the Grimm’s collection. Perhaps not, but these sometimes bawdy, often gruesome stories are very much like those in Italo Calvino’s much larger collection, *Italian Folktales*, originally published in the



### A FOLK TALE JOURNEY THROUGH THE MARITIMES by Helen Creighton

Breton Books, 249 pages, \$19.95 paper (ISBN 1 895415 28 4)

Reviewed by Janet McNaughton

1950s. Both sets of tales have an uncensored immediacy about them that allows the reader to understand how these incredible yet repetitive stories could hold the attention of audiences of adults generation after generation.

Because this book aims to present folk-tales in versions as close to their oral tellings as possible, the texts have been tampered with very little and the resulting stories are often confusing. More than once I felt like a folk-tale hero lost in a forest of pronouns of uncertain attribution. Sometimes Creighton or Taft and Caplan altered the text to avoid such confusion. They should have done so more often. But this flaw does not diminish the overall value of this book. Like most excursions, a folk-tale journey is not to everyone’s taste. But those who like this kind of foray will find *A Folk Tale Journey through the Maritimes* a satisfying one. ○

# Briefs

## Fiction

IT'S ALL a question of supply and demand. Create the desire for a story, and a story will flow. "Supply and Demand," one of 10 short stories in Gary Whitehead's *I Can Fix Anything* (Arsenal Pulp, 160 pages, \$13.95 paper) is a hilarious second-person (that's right, "you") narrative of a man with a profound understanding of how this works.

Whitehead creates several orders of fictional worlds in *I Can Fix Anything*. In four stories, the author's creations coexist with fictional characters from "The Andy Griffiths Show," *Casablanca*, *King Kong*, and Kafka's "The Metamorphosis." In four others, suburban men and women balance precariously between boredom and horror in a world where interaction is minimal, and where what communication there is seems threatening.

"Supply and Demand," a simple story of business savvy, has a clever metafictional twist, as does the provocative "My Finite Chevy," where the world as we know it is filtered through language as hardly anyone knows it, with pronouns and verbs taking on a life of their own. In Whitehead's diverse imaginative realms, characters seem to be sleepwalking through lives scripted by a strange hand.

Although Whitehead tries too hard, and at times his experiments seem strained, *I Can Fix Anything* supplies clever plots and quirky characters, as well as a few metafictional tricks. It's all a question of what the reader demands of a story.

Julie Adam

IN "The House on High Street," the first of Budge Wilson's nine stories in *The Courtship* (Anansi, 151 pages, \$14.95 paper), a Halifax woman in her mid-40s recalls a childhood visit to relatives. During her visit, the girl witnessed evidence of an unexpected adult relationship, but Wilson writes of it so off-handedly that the reader is unsure of the implications. The adult narrator then briefly ponders the events, but without coming to any insight — so there's no reason for the story's narrative frame. Is this an example of how *not* to write a story? Pretty much so.

Wilson's other tales are equally flimsy and unsatisfying. Many of them involve bossy, domineering mothers who turn their sons into pompous adults, whether bachelors ("The Losers") or husbands ("Mrs. MacIntosh"). In all cases the mother is a caricature who harks back to the similarly unlikely moms of Wilson's previous collection, *The Leaving*.

Because of the bland writing and smooth surfaces, melodramatic events, which are often the turning points, stand out as contrived. Even in the potentially strong "The Dress," in which a shy girl's birthday party turns into a social tragedy, several farfetched situations and conversations occur before a Life Lesson is ruefully learned.

The only satisfactory story is "Mrs. Garibaldi and Leonardo," a whimsical fantasy about a woman dumped into a home for the elderly who nonetheless manages to find happiness — and give her selfish son a comic comeuppance. Its grasp of human comedy and wistful isolation is appealing.

John Charles

## Non-Fiction

AN UPDATED and expanded version of the 1987 anthology *Too Few to Count. In Conflict with the Law: Women and the Canadian Justice System* (Press Gang, 302 pages, \$18.95 paper), edited by Ellen Adelberg and Claudia Currie, focuses on women offenders and the lack of attention to their needs.

The nine essays collected in this book achieve exactly what they set out to do: to disturb, challenge, and inform. The authors — criminologists, journalists, activists, writers, and academics — explode myths about female offenders with the casualness of demolition experts. Women in prison are *not* violent and predatory lesbians. The women's liberation movement has *not* led to an explosion of female crime. The majority of the participants in prostitution are male, *not* female.

The treatment of female offenders in Canada has ranged from calculated cruelty to indifference. Even in what should be more enlightened times, because such a small proportion of crimes is committed by women, little has been done to tailor justice to their specific needs. Prison facilities and resources, modelled on those for men, are often ludicrously inappropriate for women. Native women, in particular, find no peace and no healing while incarcerated. For many, prison is simply "an extension of life on the outside."

On a somewhat brighter note, *In Conflict with the Law* is evidence that there's a growing effort to improve the lot of Canadian women offenders.

Anne Giardini

WHEN HE DIED in 1992 at the age of 35, Dr. Peter Jepson-Young was probably Canada's most visible person with AIDS. His weekly AIDS diaries — initially televised for local Vancouver audiences, then made into an award-winning documentary — gave a human face to a tragic pandemic. Talking about everything from experimental drugs and homophobia to learning how to ski while blind, Dr. Peter (as he came to be known) was well informed, funny, intelligent, and balanced. Each of these adjectives could apply to Daniel Gawthrop's *Affirmation: The AIDS Odyssey of Dr. Peter* (New Star, 248 pages, \$16 paper).

A frequent writer on gay and lesbian topics, Gawthrop explains issues beautifully, without diatribe or condescension. He's as sensitive to Jepson-Young's parents or in-your-face AIDS activists as he is to his subject, and even includes homophobic letters written by viewers unhappy with watching an openly gay man on publicly funded television. Neither fawning nor judgemental, Gawthrop's portrait shows an exceptional but human individual whose life touched thousands.

It's surprising how much is covered in this book, which provides (among other things) a very readable and concise history of AIDS issues in North America. Many of Dr. Peter's 111 diary entries — exemplary in their clarity — are reprinted, including the popular "Affirmation" meditation that summed up the young doctor's personal spirituality.

While Jepson-Young's diaries were especially popular with other AIDS patients and caregivers, the terminally ill, the blind, and gay men and lesbians looking for positive role-models, his message spoke to all. *Affirmation* tells his story of taking hold of life and living with dignity; it too is universal.

Glenn Sumi

THERE HAVE been a number of kiss-and-tell (or kiss-and-brag) books written about the modern advertising industry, so the Madison Avenue beat would seem to be well covered. Randy Scotland's *The Creative Edge: Inside the Ad Wars* (Viking, 225 pages, \$27.99 cloth), though, has two things going for it that make it well worth reading. First, it is not a self-aggrandizing insider's story: Scotland is a business writer who gained access to the inner world of big-time advertising, and reports it with a keen journalistic eye. Second, it is specifically about the Canadian ad industry. That doesn't make it qualitatively different from books about the US business, but it does involve us as readers in personalities and campaigns that we instantly recognize.

The Toronto firm of Vickers and Benson agreed to let Scotland, a *Financial Post* writer, be privy to all but the company's most sensitive financial secrets. It was a brave risk on the part of the executives, and an intimidating task for the reporter. But it paid off on almost all counts.

This inside story of Vickers and Benson's unsuccessful attempt to win the big Shopper's Drug Mart account is a richly detailed modern "war" story, with heroes, goats, failed strategies, and casualties. The one fault of the book is that Scotland sometimes loses his perspective. He occasionally makes the protagonists sound like noble crusaders rather than human beings trying to make a buck on Bay Street. Still, *The Creative Edge* provides us with wonderful insight into a world that dominates modern life but remains essentially mysterious.

George Kaufman

## Poetry

IN ONE POEM in *Girl by the Water* (Turnstone, 126 pages, \$12.95 paper), Gary Geddes notes that "The Chinese have a phrase, *yu-shih*, that translates, roughly, / as left-over history. If it's not / available, invent it." It's a good way to describe his poetic project, creating and stitching together fragments, impressions, and anecdotes to give shape and meaning to (and often contradict) the official version of events. The title series is a documentary treatment of romantic balladry: a local beauty's suicidal drowning over lost love. The poems are written from the point of view of the main characters and the bystanders: the girl's fellow chambermaid, the priest who half-dozes through her last confession, the merchant who short-changes her on the muslin she buys for her shroud, her equivocal paramour ("I suppose we were lovers"), the girl herself. What emerges is a picture of a historically forgettable, provincial society, where a tough young servant girl escapes into the glow of myth by means of a splendid, terrible gesture and a white cotton gown.

Elsewhere in this collection, Geddes takes us through stories and meditations on a Yukon residency, his farm home and neighbours in Ontario, his boyhood in British Columbia, and another myth deconstruction: a series of reminiscing monologues by Mao Zedong, talking to Bethune's ghost. The poems are variously contemplative, bewildered, sardonic, angry, and occasionally exalted. Unlike much verse mapping this aesthetic and psychological territory, though, Geddes's best work is finally unparaphrasable — the real reason to write poetry.

Scott Ellis



# The Lightning Inside

**I**N HIS COLLECTION *The Long Road Home* (Goose Lane, 122 pages, \$12.95 paper), Eric Trethewey attends to the seasoned hopes and griefs of people who live lives of labour and poverty. The man perennially scouring the Nova Scotia backroads for a home he can afford, the woman who has carried three stillborn babies, the men on the evening shift lugging boxes in New Orleans:

*Past midnight, ten, twenty  
years deep in it, they yank  
at time boxed up into hours,  
beaved onto rollers and stacked  
in the holds of eighteen-wheelers  
to be hauled away to places  
they've never been to,  
will never go.*

("Evening Shift")

Around these trajectories of grey distress, Trethewey weaves resilience, vision, hope, consolation; he muses about "how difficult / each day can be without / small gifts to brighten / our merely human lives" ("Ditch"). *The Long Road Home* is a fistful of those gifts.

In Gianna Patriarca's *Italian Women and Other Tragedies* (Guernica, 78 pages, \$15 paper), we find crafted poems, delicate and precise, that chart the immigrant experience. Patriarca is particularly drawn to domestic space, and writes with passion about its beauty and its lurking violence:

*will you understand  
if i speak to you  
of the child  
whose body is  
mapped by belt buckles  
because she is the  
fifth girl to be born*

*to an immigrant  
father*

("Bambini")

These are often angry poems, but they are also generous, empathetic. Her own embittered father is perceived as a victim of the immigrant's loneliness and unfamiliarity: "for thirty years now / he's slept in a foreign bed / that has curved his spine" ("Perhaps").

Patriarca works the short line with simplicity and grace, in both English and Italian. Of Italian women, she writes:

*I have seen them wrap their souls  
around their children  
and serve their own hearts  
in a meal they never  
share*

("Italian Women")

Patriarca refuses to do the same; she wraps her soul around her community, but partakes wholly in the challenge of writing her living with integrity.

A Plains Cree, Louise Halfe speaks, in *Bear Bones & Feathers* (Coteau, 130 pages, \$9.95 paper), of her people, their difficulties and sorrows, their compelling engagement with the rhythms of the planet.

Halfe's writing is tender and funny, and oddly fresh in its imagery. A daughter, taking her aging mother back home, says: "Yes, Mama, the old fridge is still there and no, there's no lightning going through to make it breathe" ("Fog Inside Mama"). We keep tripping over this innocence, which is profound enough to also admit brutality. Halfe addresses alcoholism and violence; she also explores the scars of residential school living: "We are given three sheets of toilet paper. / We learn to fold and refold. / A hundred little

squares of shit squeezed inside my heart” (“Returning”).

This book traces an arc of hope, as Halfe utters with anger and humour and clarity the domestic storms of childhood, the cultural displacement of adolescence, and her gradual return to “the sweet sweetgrass smoke and sweatlodge rocks” (“Returning”). *Bear Bones & Feathers* leaves us with the voice of a woman whose

*woods map her dreams  
the west wind braids  
strands of grey hair  
to the earth in her feet.  
 (“Roots and Wings”)*

*The 52nd State of Amnesia* (TSAR, 96 pages, \$10.95 paper) is Krisantha Sri Bhaggiyadatta’s howl of protest: from the “concrete spaceship, Toronto” (“The Discovery of Amnesia”), he decries the imperialist politics that narrow the lives of Canadian immigrants:

*Apartheid we’re taught is something  
someplace else.  
(multiculturalism is a code word  
for para-statal neo-tribalism)  
The latest fashions: Ethnic  
International,  
beauty a mask, for the united colonials  
(of oblivion).*

Bhaggiyadatta is savagely funny: he speaks, for instance, of “the embellished history of syphilisation” (“most english teachers are racists”) and recounts the tortured English of Carmana as she blurts out, “i wanna buy the ghun / and shwoot that Mulroneyl!” (“Carmana”).

*The 52nd State of Amnesia* is a warning from one of our voices of conscience; we would do well to pay attention.

*Mad Angels and Amphetamines* (Insomniac/HarperCollins, 96 pages, \$12.95 paper), edited by Mike O’Connor,

features the work of four writers — Nik Beat, Mary Elizabeth Grace, Noah Leznoff, and Matthew Remski — each paired with a graphic designer. I applaud the collaborative impulse at work here: allowing media to interact makes for an increasingly textured reading experience.

In essence, *Mad Angels* is four chapbooks published together in book form, and the quality of the work varies dramatically. The strongest is Noah Leznoff’s “Why We Go to Zoos.” The texts here range from sparely imagistic to the uncramped sprawl of oral narrative. And Shilling Chau has designed pages that are beautiful, or raw, pages that haunt the poems.

The voice here has an attractive edginess: the whales at Sea World have eyelids with

*human  
wrinkles,  
and,  
I swear,  
they’re grinning. Like they know  
they’re ostensible fucking  
mythologies or  
something.  
 (“Why We Go to Zoos”)*

Leznoff has nerve; I look forward to reading more of him.

Lise Downe’s *A Velvet Increase of Curiosity* (ECW, 76 pages, \$12.95 paper) is perfectly named: this writing shimmies away from *terra firma*, follows tendrils of wondering. I like the dance, Downe’s willingness to be “genuinely devoted to the many / and arbitrary” (“And Shine Alike”).

Downe is also a painter, which may account for her resistance to a simply referential language: she transcribes a visual imagination in a textual medium. Writing, for her, is

*to make small into space  
habitual comfort a vexation  
all blossoming difficult  
fragrant beshadowed*

*until bone is above and below  
bobbing up and down  
a screw loose somewhere  
securing an accurate reading  
 (“Abundance of Shores”)*

Our challenge is to enter this world of syntactic slippage, to allow that velvet increase: the rewards, I think, are as profuse as the leaves that thicken the cover.

Jeff Derksen’s *Dwell* (Talonbooks, 98 pages, \$12.95 paper) is a series of adventures in language and living: Derksen speaks the collision of particulars, abstract and concrete, that comprise consciousness.

For Derksen, context is the way we name ourselves, and this underwrites his powerful consciousness of the politics of systems — bureaucratic, economic, scientific, textual — and subjectivity. It also helps place the blur of information we encounter in this writing. Derksen disrupts our habits of knowing to explore other ways of making sense:

*The fish instinctively know where the  
international  
boundaries are.*

*The dupe quotient seemed to apply so  
clearly to me  
that I had to leave the table.*

*Soviet Union 24.9%.*

“Interface of self and place.” Derksen writes, “passes me through a translation machine” (“Interface”): that passage produces a canny text, astute and sharp. This is a brilliant mind at work, dwelling in, dwelling on. ○

## FIRST NOVELS .....

BY MAUREEN McCALLUM GARVIE



# Past Denials

**L**IKE MANY FIRST NOVELS, William Lynch's *Parksville* (Oolichan, 156 pages, \$10.95 paper) is a better book than its packaging suggests; however apt, the cover painting of a strange man cycling through a dark woods is undeniably ugly. But *Parksville* is a surprising, subtle work, a tale told by a madman, a gifted sculptor-maskmaker by the name of Ginn. Eccentric to the point of dysfunction (Glenn Gould comes to mind), he is released from institutional care at his famous brother's behest, to make a set of masks for a new film.

The story is unlikely, but we take a seat inside Ginn's head and hang on for the ride. Lynch vividly conjures Ginn's view of the world as entirely animate and sensate. The phone receiver off its hook lies "like a wounded thing": " 'I've seen wounded things before,' he says. 'The shoe was the worst. It was by itself on the sidewalk ... people didn't notice ... they wouldn't know how to help.' "

Scenes of Ginn's visionary, often comic ferry journey to Parksville are interspersed with slices of Parksville lives. These find a counterpart in Ginn's masks, but I never did get the point of the TV movie listings in French that decorate the text. *Parksville* itself would make a wonderful film, though it would require an exceptional director to translate its singular vision to the screen.

If *Parksville* is a modest production, *The Museum of Love* (Overlook Press/Viking, 214 pages, \$29.99 cloth) by Steve Weiner, a Wisconsin-born writer living in Vancouver, has "extraordinary début" written all over it. Issued first in the United States and Britain, it bowled over reviewers who hailed it as an astonishing, hallucinatory work of "Great Lakes magic realism." Set in the 1950s on Lake Superior's north shore, it has a 12-year-old protagonist, Jean-Michel Verhaeren, the son of a prison guard and a

dark-haired Québécois/Polish girl seduced from the convent. Jean-Michel stows away on a laker, runs away to live with the Ojibway, goes to reform school, falls in love. Exotic strangers tell their stories. His saintly brother drowns, friends and loved ones die by the score, often literally falling apart, a knee here, a kidney there. His father, fired for torturing a Black prisoner, explodes from a life of lust; his mother disintegrates. His father's motto was *Sauve qui peut*; Jean-Michel's is *I was cheated*. Trying to make sense of life's grotesque mysteries, he visits surreal museums — of fish, police, suicide, love — where skinned goats lie by herbaceous borders and elderly Black men serve tea.

*The Museum of Love* impressed me again and again with its nightmarish imagery and writerly control, but it never truly engaged me. It was a relief to retreat to the daylight landscapes of Laura MacDonald and Alex Pugsley's *Kay Darling* (Coach House, 212 pages, \$16.95 paper), to the safe shallows of Generation X angst. *Kay Darling* has three central characters, a gay actor named Will, and Kay and Claire, two sisters from the Maritimes whose shared phobia is that they will fall from the tightrope and end up back in Moncton. Kay, a scriptwriter, functions on a higher level than Claire, a "Camay feminist from U of T," a moral, intellectual, and emotional mess. Will's star rises highest, but at the cost of his integrity. Initially epistolary, the book tracks Kay and her milieu between Montreal, Toronto, and Hollywood. Kay's movement is predicated on her working life; Claire's mobility is limited by the men she loves. The best scenes of the book are its sisterly dialogues — both for what's said and what's held back by gritted teeth. *Kay Darling* is a tidy piece of work, though not very memorable, perhaps because none of its characters are particularly likeable.

**Breathing Each Other's Air** (Polestar, 176 pages, \$14.95 paper) is Florence McNeil's 16th book (she is a poet, anthologist, and writer of young-adult fiction) but first adult novel. Her narrator, an academic named Elizabeth Morrison, is researching a biography of an actress/adventuress whose ship collided with another vessel and sank off the coast of British Columbia in 1915. The other boat was sailed by an English couple with a German surname, suspected enemy agents. Elizabeth dives to find the wrecks, and nearly drowns. In her rap-ture of the deep she reveals the murkiness of her own past. *i.e.*, the drowning of her beloved father. McNeil writes with fluid economy, calling on YA-fiction conventions such as time slip and dialogue with the dead. Her middle-aged heroine is in fact somewhat adolescent, still resenting parental pressures, still fighting to establish her identity. The story darts along, but the mystery is a red herring and the actress who sparks the story is never more than a tintype; the emphasis on the hapless British couple seems oddly superfluous, the revelations about Elizabeth's father rushed past.

Catherine Joyce's **Locked Rooms** (Burnside Books, 274 pages, \$22.95 paper), first in a proposed five-novel sequence, employs a similarly vivid, impressionistic style, though its pace is more deliberate. It too features a drowned father and resentful mother, but further thickens its plot with twins. At 40, the once sylph-like Molly, now gross and mysteriously pregnant, is holed up on the family farm. Clair, her tidy, controlling sister, struggles to evict her so that the property can be sold. While the story is often absorbing, its characterization is a weakness: everyone is snide, and the parents are so inhumanly withholding of affection that it is hard to believe in them.

Joan Fern Shaw's **Frank and Annie** (Oberon, 133 pages, \$26 cloth, \$13 paper) works in a different key, a distinctly crisp and clear one. Lucinda Forrester, now a retired schoolteacher, recalls her first job in wartime in a one-room schoolhouse in Bruce County. Frank and Annie are older pupils who these days would be referred to as intellectually challenged. Frank, says Lucy candidly, looks like a pig ("not the cute Porky cartoon, but a real pig, long and slow moving"). Annie is "built like a grandmother." Yet their young teacher's growing love and respect for them changes her life.

Many details — Lucy's papering the school outhouse, and the hencoop that becomes the newlyweds' first home, for example — sound as much like memoir as fiction. The portraits of the community — the minister and his wife who share their house with the novice schoolteacher, the mailman, the students and their families — are equally distinct. Alongside run darker currents of black dogs and witches, sex and death.

Unfortunately the book's vitality is obscured by the usual bland Oberon format: the cover painting completely misrepresents the book's period and tone. By contrast, the design of Hiromi Goto's **Chorus of Mushrooms** (NeWest, 222 pages, \$12.95 paper) enhances an experiential text that mixes stream-of-consciousness narration, Japanese characters, shopping lists, folk-tales, and news stories.

A kind of Japanese-Albertan version of *The Stone Angel*, **Chorus of Mushrooms** is a granddaughter's story of her grandmother, Kiyokawa Naoe. Young Murasaki spins a tale to her lover of a stubborn old woman in exile in her daughter's home, who leaves her wooden chair after 20 years and takes to the road. Hitching a ride from a trucker (a cowboy-music lover and Japanese

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scholar), the old woman takes the wheel while he sleeps. She is now mythically at large, only an occasional Mastercard bill marking her progress.

The grandmother's imaginary voice rings more authentically than the granddaughter's realistic one: *Chorus of Mushrooms* is uneven. But the retold folk-tales — a wonderful version of Tom Thumb, and another about a *yamanba* (mountain woman) through whose strong body the whole world is reborn — are marvels. Murasaki (called Muriel by her mother) describes in sharp detail the mushroom farm where her parents strive for success at the expense of their Japanese identity.

*Chorus of Mushrooms*'s urgent theme, implicit in all these works, is the crippling effects of denying race and past in order to blend in with a colourless culture in a new country. ○



## The Write Stuff

**I**N COMMON PARLANCE THE WORD "author" is generally perceived as referring to a writer who has published a book. In the world of publishing, and the world of children's publishing is no exception, an author may never have been, and may never be, a writer. Authors of books may be qualified by their good intentions, their academic qualifications, their life, or profes-

sional experience — anything and everything but their ability to write. Eric Lindros, for example, is one author who seems unlikely to metamorphose into a true writer.

Don Gillmor, though a relative newcomer to the world of children's literature, is a writer through and through. *When Vegetables Go Bad* (Doubleday, 32 pages, \$14.95 cloth) is a delectable book, and the illustrations by the extraordinary Marie-Louise Gay only add to the delight. Ivy

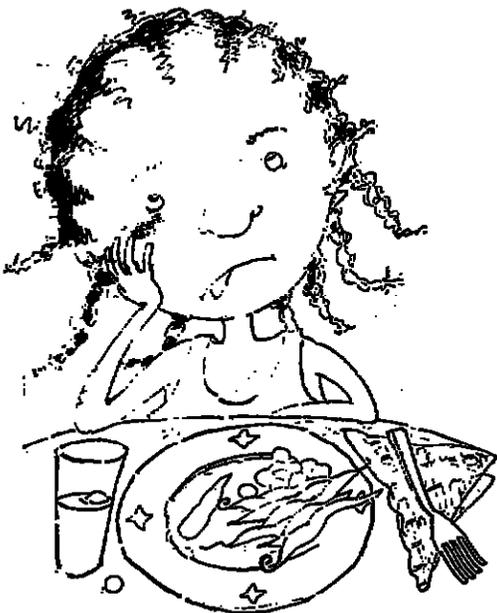
is of the vegetable-hating breed of child (contrary to popular opinion, vegetable-loving children do exist; I own one). One night the soggy veggies Ivy has stowed in a handkerchief come back to haunt her. They have indeed gone bad, just as do children who don't listen to their parents, and now practically sport switchblades and leather jackets. The plot is perfectly paced and the writing impeccable. Gay is at her exuberant best. What more can you ask? Well, though Gillmor works hard to avoid the it-was-all-a-dream ending, I would ask whether younger readers might find the final ambiguity a touch sinister for a bedtime story. This cavil aside, *When Vegetables Go*

*Bad* is a superb picture-book sure to appeal to vegetable-lovers and -haters alike.

Laura Langston and Robert Amos are also new to children's books; *No Such Thing as Far Away* (Orca, 32 pages, \$14.95 cloth) is a first for both. Although Amos is a skilled draughtsman and watercolourist, his inexperience as a children's-book illustrator is evident. The cityscape of Vancouver's Chinatown is evocatively portrayed, but in far too many of the illustrations the buildings, and not the characters, dominate the composition. Langston's story is a sensitive evocation of a child's attachment to place, and the carefully worked text is evidence of strong writing skills. It's too bad that Amos's artwork doesn't better support the story.

Budge Wilson's *Cassandra's Driftwood* (Pottersfield, 48 pages, \$7.95 paper), illustrated by Terry Roscoe, tells the story of a young girl whose shyness prevents her from expressing her feelings. This is clear, consistent writing about a complex but believable character. Somewhat predictably, Wilson provides her protagonist with a dilemma that enables her to break out of the "box" of self-consciousness the author rather deftly describes. Wilson is deeply connected with the child's perspective; perhaps it is only the impatient adult in me that wishes she were somewhat less deliberate in her explication of her heroine's inner feelings.

Robert Priest and Robin Skelton both have ample literary qualifications. While Priest now seems to be focusing on children's writing, producing plays, novels, and poetry in addition to his children's music, Skelton is better known as a poet, translator, and academic. Priest's *A Terrible Case of the Stars* (Penguin, 64 pages, \$9.99 paper) and Skelton's *I Am Me: Rhymes for Small* (Sono Nis, 32 pages, \$9.95 paper) are both poems for children, but Skelton is targeting the youngest possible poetry audience, and he does a tidy job of reaching them. Despite the coy,



**From *When Vegetables Go Bad***

rather Victorian subtitle, these poems are perfectly in tune with the life experience and viewpoint of very young children. They're fresh, immediate, and quite beautifully and tightly written.

Priest's *A Terrible Case of the Stars*, which is illustrated by Don Gauthier, is less sure of its intended audience, and suffers from it. Too often the poems are so highly fanciful that they seem forced. Too often the imaginative scenarios lack the internal logic that even fantasy must maintain. In poems such as "Orange Orange," "All People Once Were Babies," or "Poem for the Ancient Trees," Priest shows what he can accomplish when his facility with language and image are grounded, however playfully, in the felt reality of childhood.

Irma McDonough Milnes brings eminent qualifications to her first book, *Kaarina and the Sugar Bag Vest* (Annick, 80 pages, \$5.95 paper), illustrated by Sami Suomalainen; she is an authority on children's literature. What she hasn't yet mastered, however, are the skills of bringing a story to life. *Kaarina and the Sugar Bag Vest* is packed with interesting facts about the life of Finnish immigrants in Canada during the Depression. But all too rarely, within the anecdotal, rather flat plot, do we get inside Kaarina's head and heart.

Lois Burdett and Christine Coburn's *Twelfth Night for Kids: Shakespeare Can Be Fun* (Black Moss, 40 pages, \$7.95 paper) is another first book, and another kettle of fish altogether. Burdett is an elementary school teacher, Coburn a parent; *Twelfth Night for Kids* comes complete with a concluding note to parents and educators on the value of making Shakespeare accessible to young children. While the authors' earnest intentions are admirable. We don't need to

"fix" *Twelfth Night* by wrenching the Bard's poetry into execrable galumphing couplets. This is an abominable production.

Rhonda O'Grady's *Bobby Bluestem* (Pemmican, 26 pages, \$9.95 paper) is not as bad, but it's not much better. Here we have another earnest expert not only "authoring" but "illustrating" a book in abysmally amateurish coloured pencil. The plot, complete with a schematic central character, is a thinly veiled expository discourse on the ecology of the Prairie. O'Grady doubtless knows a lot about botany and the environment, but she can't seem to write and she certainly can't draw.

Well, there seem to be books by writers and books by authors, but in *Mayuk the Grizzly Bear: A Legend of the Sechelt People and How the Robin Got Its Red Breast: A Legend of the Sechelt People* (Nightwood, 24 pages,

\$5.95 paper) I've encountered my very first books apparently not penned by any individual human hand. Copyright for the text goes to the Sechelt Nation, and well it should, although somebody must have put these words on paper.

Children seem to have an endless capacity for legends and how-the-something-got-its-something tales, and both these books will prove infinitely satisfying to their readers. Whoever the anonymous writer, these are lovely stories told swiftly, surely, and beautifully. Charlie Craigan, who illustrated both books, is identified, and his black-and-white illustrations are striking. Craigan presents both traditional Sechelt abstract style and conventional woodcut style. While this complex, intriguing, and somewhat difficult mix could perhaps have been better served by a clearer design, these are books that will be read and read again by their avid young audience. ○

## YOUNG-ADULT BOOKS BY PAT BARCLAY

# Next Teller, Please

TODAY WE'RE LOOKING at half a dozen new titles that succeed in slipping the instructional baby very comfortably into the entertainment bathwater — a tricky proposition for any serious novelist, but especially so for the writer of fiction for young people who also values the approval of teachers, librarians, parents, reviewers, and bookstore managers with pretensions to taste (i.e., they can't bring themselves to stock totally mindless entertainment). As it happens, five of the six books have a female protagonist, each of whom is worth getting to know.

For example, Mary Blakeslee's *Stop the Presses, Ida Mae!* (McClelland &

Stewart, 115 pages, \$9.99 paper) features Ida Mae Evans, who is 12, spunky, accident-prone, and seldom at a loss for a bright idea. Invited to contribute to the school paper, she tries writing an astrology column and develops an enthusiastic following until the writ hits the fan. She also dabbles in the stock market with the help of her exotic 82-year-old mentor, Great Aunt Glory Paradise, and gets herself in a snit when her best friend starts dating a Boy. Blakeslee's ear for dialogue and ability to create likeable characters make this a lively and entertaining story with some worthwhile insights into friendship and gullibility.

Three of these novels focus on a young heroine who has been uprooted from the familiar and must embark on a new life. In *City Pictures* (McClelland & Stewart, 168 pages, \$9.99 paper), by Shirlee Smith Matheson, 13-year-old Sherri Farquhar moves to Calgary from the comfortable rural home she knew in *Prairie Pictures* (1989), Matheson's first book about Sherri and her adventures. In the city, life is anything but comfortable when Sherri's dad runs into problems at work, her mom acquires a set of snooty friends, and Sam, the glamorous girl-next-door, introduces her to shoplifting. Interestingly, it is Bonnie, Sherri's six-year-old sister, who has her feet firmly planted on *terra firma* and serves as the solid centre of the family. *City Pictures* seems impressively real, particularly when shoplifting charges are laid and Sherri and Sam must deal with the consequences. It's also a convincing portrait of how a "functional family" manages to stay that way when disaster strikes.

In Janet McNaughton's *Catch Me Once, Catch Me Twice* (Creative, 168 pages, \$11.95 paper), 12-year-old Evelyn McCallum has to leave her beloved outport home and move to St. John's, where she and her pregnant mother will live with Evelyn's grandparents while her father is away fighting in the Second World War. McNaughton, who lives in St. John's, has a splendid time with her historical setting and the hint of fairy folk that still drifts over Newfoundland. Her strong-minded heroine meets an interesting boy, tangles with her equally strong-minded grandmother, and makes serious inroads on the problem of growing up. ("There isn't any way to get back to the time when Mum and Dad took care of everything for me," thinks Evelyn as she resists the temptation to run away, back to the outport.) McNaughton may have

tried a little too hard with this book, which covers every conceivable base and then some, but the overall result is richly textured and satisfying.

Julie Johnston is already celebrated for her Governor General's Award-winning first novel, *Hero of Lesser Causes* (1992), and *Adam and Eve and Pinch Me* (Lester, 180 pages, \$16.95 cloth) should further enhance her reputation. Set in rural Ontario, the story follows the metamorphosis of Sara Moone, its 15-year-old heroine, from a defiant, introverted foster child who hates to be touched, into an involved and important member of her new family and community. The story also acquires a mythic dimension through the characters of quiet Hud and talkative Ma, the good couple who love and value Sara and teach her to love and value herself. Johnston's assured use of Sara as narrator of her own story — she types it into her computer at the end of the day — is an effective means of disclosing her emerging personality, and the unsettling arrival in the neighbourhood of Sara's birth mother adds conflict and suspense. All this plus teenage romance, thoroughly developed characters, and Sara's acid wit as she tells her story have produced a book that's a real "keeper." I just wish that Johnston hadn't made Ruth, Sara's social worker, into such a cotton-pickin' saint.

Michael Bedard's *Painted Devil* (Lester, 224 pages, \$16.95 cloth) gets off to a rather rocky start as Alice, the teenage heroine, humours her four-year-old sister by attending a dolls' tea party. Oh dear. Before long, however, Alice finds herself in real hot water when her boss at the crumbling library where she works after school persuades her to help him stage an old-fashioned puppet show, featuring Punch and Judy and the Devil

himself. Great spooky goings-on, much amplified by the presence of Alice's mysterious Aunt Emily, who never quite got over an evil magic show she witnessed as a child. Bedard's prose style is more than equal to the challenge of creating an atmosphere of subtle menace ("Around her she felt the inexorable fall of dark, the quiet bleeding of color from the earth": "The sandbox looked alarmingly like a grave site .... Horrors burst like shellfire upon her brain ...."); this is a writer with a compelling and individual voice.

Individuality is also the hallmark of the 34 contributors to *Next Teller: A Book of Canadian Storytelling* (Ragweed, 256 pages, \$12.95, paper), an anthology put together by Dan Yashinsky. Though not aimed specifically at younger readers, many of the stories here will appeal to them. Legends, folk-tales, even true stories about simple things made extraordinary in the telling — this collection encompasses much of the vast variety of cultures and traditions that Canadians are increasingly coming to appreciate as their own. The stories are grouped under four main headings: "Curious Children," "Tricksters," "Lovers," and "Hauntings," and are followed by four "Tellers' Tales" that, as the contributor Robert Minden puts it, are stories that "come from my life, moments that marked me or changed me in some mysterious way."

Be warned, though, that reading this book may begin to change your life. As Yashinsky notes in his prologue:

If you like a story you read here, it will start to belong to you. If you remember it after you put the book down, then you've given it a home. And if you re-tell it to a new listener, then you've become the Next Teller. O

*Ain't We Got Funds*

**T**HERE ARE  
few specta-  
cles as repugnant

and, ultimately, pointless as cultural or political polarization. Such extreme division is usually formed by two ignorant and splenetic solitudes sustained by a refusal to realize and accept that there is a middle, moderate, and correct path. A perfect example of this is the debate over state funding of the arts, and of literature in particular. The issue is in focus once again, with both sets of champions polishing their rusty swords. The literary critic John Metcalf's heavy-handed and notorious condemnation of grants and grant-supported writing has reappeared in *Freedom from Culture* (ECW), a new collection of his work. Metcalf is supported by those quixotic advocates of the free market's invisible hand, whose knowledge of economics is dwarfed only by their ignorance of the arts.

Opposing this position we have the CBC-friendly defenders of the status quo, seemingly determined to subsidize even a sneeze or a cough from the writers of *This Magazine* or the authors at McClelland & Stewart as long as these involuntary expirations are in the interest of Canadian nationalism. Such people have a great deal for which to answer.

Between these positions lies something both horribly dull and undeniably glorious: a balanced, intelligent financial support for potential or inchoate excellence, and even a little helping along of a few gutsy mediocrities. If Canadian letters are to continue to enjoy the benefits of state support there must be a judicious reform of the funding process.

First, we cannot continue to pour

money into hopeless causes. If the government continued to support an industry that was a perennial loss-maker there would be a massive outcry. Similarly, authors who fail to produce viable pieces of work for which they were given grants should not receive any further grants. There are a number of such writers, who specialize in applying for money for projects that will never come to fruition; projects that they had no intention of completing, or in some cases of even starting.

Second, in line with the above, we have to be more selective in whom we support. Funds are severely limited. A friend of mine, a respected and talented author who is partly in the grant-giving business, told me that "some of the people we help are literally unsure where the next meal is coming from." I am sorry for them. But not very. If they have been in this position for some years it should have occurred to them by now that they are in the wrong profession. A young poet with ambitions is allowed to starve with romantic dignity; a middle-aged novelist with children and responsibilities really ought to know better.

Third, we should consider the idea of a payback scheme. If writers make sufficient money from a book for which they received government support, they should perhaps repay the grant-giving body, which in turn could help another struggling author.

Fourth, all juries should be blind. That is, not appallingly myopic, but unaware of the names of those applying for financial support, as currently occurs in only one major grant contest at either the Ontario Arts Council or Canada Council. This would prevent most of the subconscious

or deliberate corruptions that occur at the moment. Examples are legion.

Fifth, we must wash from us the stains of politically correct jaundice and judge applications according to their merit. There is now an almost tangible degree of bitterness felt by many writers who do not belong to officially identified "minority groups" at what they see as the impossibility of their receiving major grants when they are competing in a system that discriminates against them. If we analyse the list of those receiving writing grants at a federal, provincial, and municipal level this anger does seem to be justified. A writing career curtailed due to lack of money is just as dreadful for a white writer as it is for a Native or Black author.

In conclusion, grant-giving agencies, liberal grandees, and radical interest groups can fiddle while Ottawa burns if they like and reject my views out of hand. But they ought to know that the dictates of the economy and the rise of the Reform Party will necessitate fundamental changes in the near future. My proposals are merely cosmetic in comparison to what may be looming on the horizon.

Oh, and I know you're asking. Yes, I've done fairly well from grants. And always completed the projects for which I have received support. If I ever become wealthy I will, of course, refrain from applying for further financing. Mind you, even now, for some strange reason, some left-leaning juries appear less generous towards me than in times past. Extraordinary. See point four. ○

Michael Coren's latest book is *The Man Who Created Narnia* (Lester).

	1 Q	2 B	3 I	4 O	5 T	6 M	7 A	8 P	9 A	10 O	11 V	12 D	13 O	14 P	15 M	16 T	
17 Q	18 J	19 U	20 T	21 F	22 D	23 L	24 M	25 Q	26 N	27 C	28 A	29 D	30 B	31 O	32 A	33 H	
34 O	35 N	36 T	37 Q	38 R	39 O	40 V	41 M	42 J	43 D	44 A	45 E	46 V	47 T	48 J	49 O	50 M	51 A
52 P	53 V	54 H	55 S	56 J	57 A	58 I	59 G	60 H	61 U	62 D	63 H	64 C	65 M	66 O	67 P	68 O	69 E
70 A	71 J	72 L	73 K	74 P	75 M	76 T	77 K	78 R	79 J	80 Q	81 F	82 H	83 A	84 M	85 I	86 B	
87 O	88 P	89 L	90 A	91 R	92 F	93 K	94 J	95 D	96 C	97 M	98 N	99 G	100 A	101 O	102 I	103 M	104 D
105 E	106 D	107 X	108 A	109 K	110 L	111 O	112 M	113 T	114 Q	115 B	116 G	117 L	118 B	119 N	120 Q	121 C	
122 T	123 B	124 F	125 M	126 O	127 G	128 L	129 A	130 Q	131 J	132 M	133 O	134 F	135 T	136 A	137 V	138 G	139 C
140 M	141 G	142 T	143 V	144 H	145 Q	146 P	147 L	148 U	149 A	150 B	151 J	152 B	153 H	154 J	155 T	156 L	
157 K	158 O	159 T	160 G	161 D	162 Q	163 H	164 V	165 U	166 G	167 H	168 P	169 A	170 E	171 O	172 S	173 B	
174 B	175 F	176 K	177 H	178 K	179 V	180 I	181 D	182 E	183 D	184 P	185 H	186 R	187 P	188 M	189 O	190 D	
191 C	192 D	193 G	194 L	195 U	196 A	197 O	198 T	199 Q	200 D	201 V	202 M	203 S	204 G	205 L			

Solution to Acrostic #64 on page 46

When properly filled in, the letters in the box form a quotation from a Canadian book. Find the letters by solving the clues below and writing the answers in the numbered spaces provided. Then transfer the letters from the spaces to the appropriate squares in the box. The first letters of each answered clue form the name of the author and title of the book (solution next month).

A. Arthur Kroker work (2 wds.)

9 136 90 149 196 169 70 28  
44 100 32 51 108 129 83 57

B. *A Nun's Diary* author (2 wds.)

115 86 150 30 123 2 152 174  
118 173

C. Not your usual ballet outfit

121 64 191 86 139 27

D. Ontario river (2 wds.)

43 12 190 104 200 29 183 106  
62 161 181

E. Set against

162 69 105 45 170 147

F. Famous Jane

81 175 134 92 21 124

G. Paint component (2 wds.)

59 99 160 127 141 193 138 166  
204 116

H. Kind of cafeteria

163 60 185 153 33 54 167

I. Extreme degree

3 180 102

J. *Changes of State* author (2 wds.)

71 18 154 48 151 42 131 56  
94 79

K. Get \_\_\_\_\_ highway; pull over (3 wds.)

73 157 77 109 178 176 93 107

L. Some apartment buildings (2 wds.)

117 205 89 128 72 156 23 110

M. Elfreida Read title (3 wds.)

97 24 75 112 188 125 41 65  
50 202 15 140 63 6 84 132

N. When things were better (2 wds.)

177 98 26 144 82 119 103 142  
35

O. Cdn. undead novel (3 wds.)

68 189 171 95 111 133 22 126  
10 87 148 39 197 4 01 31

P. Author of above (2 wds.)

146 67 184 74 187 14 52  
168 88 8

Q. "\_\_\_\_\_ carapace."  
Marshall McLuhan axiom (5 wds.)

158 192 37 114 199 145 17 130  
61 120 25 1 34 49 80 13  
162 66

R. German dog

186 78 38 91

S. Football position

172 55 203

T. Commercial catch-phrase (3 wds.)

58 155 36 135 5 85 20 188  
47 113 76 159 122 16

U. Conjunction

195 185 19

V. \_\_\_\_\_ Monthly, 1925-29  
periodical

143 137 201 11 40 179 46 164  
53

*Radical Pasts*

CONSIDERED purely as a piece of book-making, Stewart Smith's memoir *Comrades and Komsomolkas: My Years in the Communist Party of Canada* (Lugus) is wretched. It's repetitious and full of typos and washed-out half-tones. In fact, it quite fills me with nostalgia. For this is what left-wing literature looked like when I was coming of age, when people were drawn to its sheer old-fashionedness and poverty of design, which seemed to us a warranty of honest content. Today, when discussion of Marxism has almost totally disappeared from Canada, readers curious about the radical past will need to shut off their visual discriminators in order to get at Smith's remarkable story.

*Comrades and Komsomolkas* (a *komsomolka* was a female member of the Young Communist League) is full of resignation about the present and future: "It will be a herculean job to rescue the names of socialism and communism from the utter discredit and shame of being associated with Stalin" (whom the author, now nearly 90, met in Moscow). It's also full of vivid glimpses of a noble past. Smith writes how, during the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919, he watched from

in front of the new city hall when a detachment of the Royal North West Mounted Police, revolvers drawn, charged the peaceful demonstration of war veterans and strikers. After the first charge they wheeled around and charged back, now firing point blank into the crowd. My brother and I ran over

to the pump house in the Market Square beside the City Hall to escape from the street battle and stood up on the water trough to get a better look.

In later years, after breaking with the party following the revelations of the horrors under Stalin, Smith was a popular figure in Toronto, as a business person and municipal politician. But he was reared in Brandon, Manitoba, where his father, the Rev. A. E. Smith, was a preacher of the Social Gospel whose progressive views often brought him into conflict with the Methodist hierarchy. In 1923 the Smiths moved to Toronto, three months after the Communist Party of Canada was founded at Guelph.

While little more than a teenager, the younger Smith was a party organizer and functionary. The extremity of his views tested the strength of his relationship with his father. But the Rev. Smith always stood by him. Indeed, he must have been swayed by his son's politics to move further left himself. At one point, Rev. Smith was charged with sedition for blowing the whistle on the authorities' cover-up of an assassination plot against Tim Buck. At the time, Buck was one of eight communist leaders in jail under Section 98 of the federal criminal code, a notorious law that prohibited membership in outlawed organizations. It was put on the books specifically to get rid of communists and socialists. The statute was repealed soon afterward, but not before Buck and the others had become living martyrs.

In doctrinal matters, Smith often disagreed with Buck (who served as general secretary of the party for 32 years and

died in 1973 at 82, leaving an interesting autobiography of his own). But he couldn't help admiring him.

Frederick Giffin was the *Toronto Star's* expert on Russia in those days, and the author of *Soviet Scene* (1924), which well deserves reprinting. In *Variety Show*, his memoirs, published in 1936, he describes what happened when "the Eight" were sent down:

They sat in rows of seats ... until the judge, sharply, told them to stand up. They stood in line, without plea or fear, without mockery and without rebellion. Certainly in this drama of Canadian justice these communists did not, by word or deed, detract from its dignity ...

The judge invited them to speak. The small Tim Buck alone responded. He did not beg; he did not plead; he took a pace forward like a soldier and, looking front, said, "I accept the sentence of the court and I only hope that those who trusted me will find that I proved worthy." Then he stepped back ...

The court was silent when Mr. Justice Wright pronounced sentence, sending these men to Kingston Penitentiary for terms up to five years ...

The condemned men stepped out smartly as a file of soldiers. Only a wave of Buck's hand, a short smile of farewell to a friend, showed that they were really men and not ideas who were going to jail. ○

Douglas Fetherling's novel *The File on Arthur Moss* is forthcoming from Lester.



## The Great Pretender

IT HAS BEEN bothering me for a while: how do I become a literary sensation? Next year I'll be 40, and as everyone knows, rising stars are young and come out of nowhere, or else New York. They don't plod along, publishing chapbooks with tiny presses and doing readings at grungy, out-of-the-way cafés; they look good in leather. Notwithstanding all the mature talent out there that garners respectful reviews and a loyal following, true excitement (and mega-publicity) is generated only by the arrival of the Next Big Thing. It's particularly exciting for all the smug media types who can tell themselves — and the rest of the world — that they saw it coming.

The received wisdom in *haut* literary circles is that you have to get an agent. A conservative, old-fashioned approach, in my view: if everyone had an agent, let's face it, whatever influence the agent had in the world of big-time publishing would be spread pretty thin. You're much better off getting a Reputation, since it's publicity that creates stars, not to mention best sellers.

My first step: I decided that the novel is where it's at; who ever heard of a movie option being taken on a book of poems? Next, an SSP (Shameless Self-Promotion) course, taught by a writer with more connections than any switching device Northern Telecom ever came up with. Unfortunately, it was here that I hit my first stumbling block, thanks to my Catholic upbringing. I have nothing against a little aggressive networking (otherwise known as Schmoozing, Advanced, and soon to be available on video), but I had to draw the line at black-

mail — and was flunked by the instructor for lack of initiative.

I did learn something from the course, though: the importance of getting to know and being seen with Influential People. They're easy to spot at any glitzy literary event, because they're always surrounded by swarms of friends (other IPs — they all know each other), wannabes, and innocent bystanders who just want to get to the bar. Luckily for me, they also all live in Toronto. So I became a local launch-lizard, hanging out at a strategic location — usually by the *hors d'oeuvres* — and shouldering my way into the crowds among the most conspicuous luminaries. (Thank heavens for my training in high-impact aerobics.) Friends, I was at the right hand of power many times, but sadly, I never got to shake it. As for making conversation: the Famous Author's gaze would drift past my name tag and settle on someone across the room (frequently my SSP instructor), with an expression that reminded me of Virginia Woolf's description of style — "something remote, separate, pure."

Was it my sloppy handwriting? My helmet hair? (Unavoidable if a bicycle is your chosen means of transport.) Or maybe the fact that I wasn't dressed as a dominatrix? Anyway, I was about as popular as a Styrofoam cup at a Pollution Probe barbecue.

"You're too 19th century," a sympathetic friend said. "The cult of personality is the big thing now. And quite frankly," she added, "you've got to do something about your hair."

She's right, of course, about the need to *be* a character, rather than just write about them. Back in Victorian times,

they hadn't even invented personality yet, and so writers didn't have to worry if they didn't have one, or at least not one worth displaying in public. But the cardinal rule nowadays for anyone wanting to get anywhere in the arts is Do Anything To Get Noticed. Unfortunately, this clashes with the law of survival I grew up with and internalized: Do Anything To Avoid Being Noticed. (It may account for me becoming a poet.)

I was beginning to think that I simply don't have what it takes to be a literary sensation, but then it occurred to me: in films, actors get stand-ins to do the stunts they can't handle, so why not *hire* someone to play my role in public? I figured that there are plenty of unemployed, media-genic actresses kicking around who have the ideal attributes: poise and presence (for glamorous *soirées*), a great voice (radio and readings), a penchant for audacity (television), and unconventional but appealing looks (photo ops). And young, it should go without saying.

Within a few weeks it was, as they say, a wrap. I put the word out in the local theatre community and found my perfect stand-in. Since "Barbara Carey" hasn't got much flash and is somewhat shop-worn, I came up with a pseudonym, which I won't divulge. I haven't yet got around to writing the novel, but my soon-to-be-famous alter ego breezed through the latest SSP course and has been diligently rehearsing. Watch for her at all the big fall launches. I'll be there, too — the one in the corner with the bad hair and the big smile. ○

*Barbara Carey's most recent book is The Ground of Events (Mercury).*

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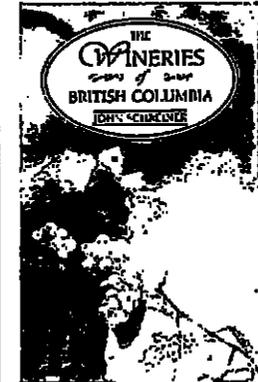
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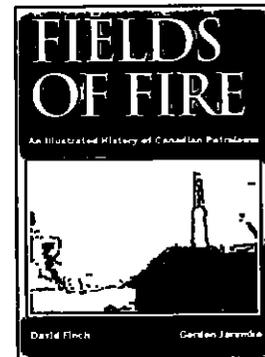
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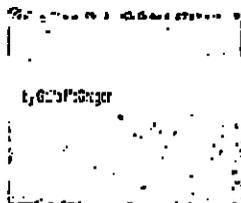
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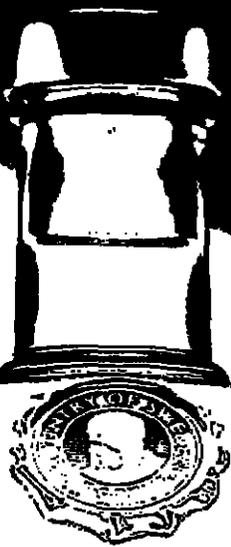
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