

SHARON BUTALA: THE PLACE WHERE WORDS STOP

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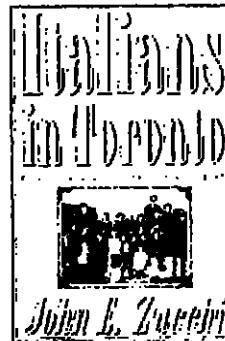
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Douglas Hill

Toronto freelance writer and editor. Ann Diamond's poetry collection *Terrorist Letters* is forthcoming from Véhicule Press. Martin Dowding is a left-handed teacher and librarian living in Peterborough, Ont. John Doyle and Cary Fagan are Toronto writers. Stan Fogel teaches English at St. Jerome's College of the University of Waterloo. George Galt is the editor of *The Thinking Heart: Best*



Maurice Mierau

*Canadian Essays* (Quarry). Alina Gavrielatos is a Toronto artist. Don Gayton is the author of *The Wheatgrass Mechanism* (Fifth House). Carole Giangrande is a freelance writer living in Islington, Ont. Anne Giardini is a lawyer living in Richmond Hill, Ont. Douglas Glover's *A Guide to Animal Behaviour* (Goose Lane) was short-listed for the 1991 Governor General's Award. Phil Hall's latest poetry collection, *The Unsaid*, is forthcoming from Brick. Greg Hardy is a Saskatoon artist. Maggie Helwig's poetry chapbook, *Graffiti for J. J. Harper and Other Poems* (Lowlife), is reviewed on page 61. Douglas Hill and Karl Jirgens are Toronto writers. Daniel Jones's novel *Obsessions* is forthcoming from Mercury Press this fall. Wayne Jones is an Ottawa writer. Adrienne Kertzer teaches in the English department of the University of Calgary. Robert Labossière is a Toronto illustrator. Russell McDougall teaches in the department of English at the University of New England in Armidale, N.S.W., Australia. Alec McEwen is a professor of surveying engineering at the University of Calgary. Kenneth McGoogan is the book-review editor of the *Calgary Herald*. Maurice Mierau is a Winnipeg writer and the former editor of the now defunct *Prairie Bookworld*. Marilyn Simonds Mohr's *The Valour and the Horror* (HarperCollins), co-written with Merrily Weisbord, is reviewed on page 40. John Oughton is the author of *Mata Hari's Lost Words* (Ragweed). Gordon Phinn is a writer who lives in Mississauga, Ont. Fred Sharpe is a Toronto puzzle addict. Sheri South is a Toronto freelance writer. David Stafford is the executive director of the Canadian Institute of International Affairs. Geoffrey Stevens writes a column on national affairs for the *Toronto Star*, *Vancouver Sun*, and *Montreal Gazette*. Donald Swainson teaches in the history department of Queen's University in Kingston, Ont. Margaret Sweatman is the author of *Fox* (Turnstone); she lives in Winnipeg. Lynne Van Luven is the book-review editor of the *Edmonton Journal*. Gretchen Zimmerman is a philosophy student at the University of Waterloo. ♣



Margaret Sweatman

Elizabeth Anthony is a writer who lives in Marlbank, Ont. Drawings throughout the issue are by Rinat Baibekov, a Toronto artist. Douglas Barbour is the editor of *Beyond Tish* (NeWest); he lives in Edmonton. Pat Barclay is a frequent contributor to these pages. Virginia Beaton is a writer living in Halifax. Allan Casey is a Saskatoon freelance writer. Michael Coren's biography of H. G. Wells is forthcoming from Random House. John Degen is a writer studying for his M.A. at the University of Toronto. Anne Denoon is a Toronto freelance writer and editor. Ann Diamond's poetry collection *Terrorist Letters* is forthcoming from Véhicule Press. Martin Dowding is a left-handed teacher and librarian living in Peterborough, Ont. John Doyle and Cary Fagan are Toronto writers. Stan Fogel teaches English at St. Jerome's College of the University of Waterloo. George Galt is the editor of *The Thinking Heart: Best Canadian Essays* (Quarry). Alina Gavrielatos is a Toronto artist. Don Gayton is the author of *The Wheatgrass Mechanism* (Fifth House). Carole Giangrande is a freelance writer living in Islington, Ont. Anne Giardini is a lawyer living in Richmond Hill, Ont. Douglas Glover's *A Guide to Animal Behaviour* (Goose Lane) was short-listed for the 1991 Governor General's Award. Phil Hall's latest poetry collection, *The Unsaid*, is forthcoming from Brick. Greg Hardy is a Saskatoon artist. Maggie Helwig's poetry chapbook, *Graffiti for J. J. Harper and Other Poems* (Lowlife), is reviewed on page 61. Douglas Hill and Karl Jirgens are Toronto writers. Daniel Jones's novel *Obsessions* is forthcoming from Mercury Press this fall. Wayne Jones is an Ottawa writer. Adrienne Kertzer teaches in the English department of the University of Calgary. Robert Labossière is a Toronto illustrator. Russell McDougall teaches in the department of English at the University of New England in Armidale, N.S.W., Australia. Alec McEwen is a professor of surveying engineering at the University of Calgary. Kenneth McGoogan is the book-review editor of the *Calgary Herald*. Maurice Mierau is a Winnipeg writer and the former editor of the now defunct *Prairie Bookworld*. Marilyn Simonds Mohr's *The Valour and the Horror* (HarperCollins), co-written with Merrily Weisbord, is reviewed on page 40. John Oughton is the author of *Mata Hari's Lost Words* (Ragweed). Gordon Phinn is a writer who lives in Mississauga, Ont. Fred Sharpe is a Toronto puzzle addict. Sheri South is a Toronto freelance writer. David Stafford is the executive director of the Canadian Institute of International Affairs. Geoffrey Stevens writes a column on national affairs for the *Toronto Star*, *Vancouver Sun*, and *Montreal Gazette*. Donald Swainson teaches in the history department of Queen's University in Kingston, Ont. Margaret Sweatman is the author of *Fox* (Turnstone); she lives in Winnipeg. Lynne Van Luven is the book-review editor of the *Edmonton Journal*. Gretchen Zimmerman is a philosophy student at the University of Waterloo. ♣



## Historical Correctness

RE: "A Classic Restored" (February), Rupert Schieder's review of the new *Who Has Seen the Wind*.

I was delighted to see a review of the new edition of *Who Has Seen the Wind*, but must correct two serious misunderstandings about the publishing history of this book. Put simply, W.O. Mitchell was not "betrayed" (whose word is this?) by Macmillan, and it is not a "mystery" why the 344-page edition was not reprinted by that publisher.

It would take too much space to go into all the details of the negotiations between Mitchell, Macmillan, and the American firm of Little, Brown, but the important points are that Mitchell had kept the Canadian rights and, finally, in May 1946, Macmillan found that they were able, after all, to finance production of their own copies rather than buy American copies. The pertinent facts as I have followed them in the Macmillan correspondence are as follows:

Oct. 28, 1946: Mitchell wrote to Macmillan: "I very much appreciate that the Canadian edition is to be much the same as the manuscript I sent you; although I have managed to get about half the cuts re-inserted, I do not consider the Little, Brown edition as good as the Canadian."

February 1947: the two different editions were published about 10 days apart.

March 13, 1947: Macmillan discussed a second printing — not a different edition — and, probably in September 1947, a second printing brought the total to about 10,000.

4. April 18, 1960: John Gray, editor at Macmillan, wrote Mitchell regarding a new printing of *Who Has Seen the Wind*. Gray explained that he would prefer to use the American version "for economy's sake." "Would you object to this?" he asked Mitchell.

May 5, 1960: Mitchell finally responded (after another letter from Gray on May 3): "Of course go ahead with your plans out-

lined for *Who Has Seen the Wind*; they sound fine to me."

From the above it should be clear that Macmillan did not "betray" Mitchell in 1947 as Schieder concludes, nor did they "mysteriously" and "unaccountably" revert to the American edition in 1960. The fact that Mitchell agreed so easily to the use of the American edition, after having disagreed so strongly with Little, Brown over the cuts, can be explained in a number of ways. He was so caught up in the writing of his new novel *The Kite* that he could hardly be bothered to answer his correspondence, let alone dredge up old fights. The 13 years may have erased some of the intensely protective feelings he had about the original *Who Has Seen the Wind*. Also, knowing that Macmillan was concerned about production costs, and given his own financial straits, he probably felt it was better to have the book out in print again in whatever version.

I hope this corrects any misunderstanding about Macmillan's role in the publication of *Who Has Seen the Wind*.

Barbara Mitchell  
Barnby Moor, York, England

## More Last Words

RE: Wayne Jones's attack on Alec McEwen.

Like Jones, I sometimes disagree with McEwen's opinions, but I disagree with Jones's even more. Allow me to criticize Jones as he criticized McEwen.

Jones thinks that because language changes, those who object to any of these changes are wrong. This is an instance of "whatever happens is good because it happens, so don't object to it." Another instance of this principle is: people kill each other; therefore, don't object if someone kills you.

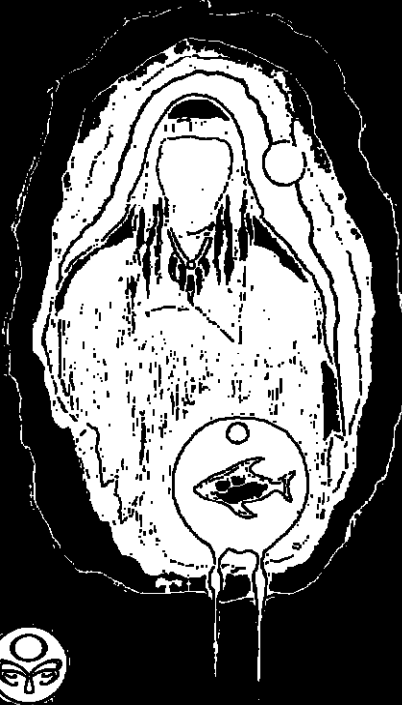
Jones says that any word that is used is by definition a word. True. But that's not the same as its being a useful word, or a necessary one. People who (awkwardly but correctly) form "ostracization" do so because they don't know that "ostracism" is available. Shouldn't they be told?

Jones complains that McEwen whines. I don't see what your tone of voice has to do with the soundness of your argument. Jones himself whinges; but that's not what invalidates his argument.

## DANGING WITH A GHOST

### Exploring Indian Reality

by Rupert Ross  
Foreword by  
Basil H. Johnston



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Lastly, Jones claims that McEwen's concern for right and wrong is old-fashioned. But if right and wrong are matters of mere fashion, Jones cannot argue that McEwen is wrong, so why is he doing so?

But suppose language change depends merely on fashion, after all. Would Jones be a better arbiter of style than McEwen? Obviously, he considers himself qualified, since he's "hip and progressive." If by that he means "fashionable," he cannot of course advise us. Only those who are not fashion's slaves can tell the rest of us what to do.

Jones needs to take a course in remedial logic, and one in remedial humility.

Wolf Kirchmeir  
Blind River, Ont.

I WAS "shocked and appalled" when I read Alec McEwen's comments on long-winded expressions in "Respectable Pedigrees" (*Last Words*, March).

To equate the long-winded expression *at this point in time* with *now* is fine, but equating *soon* and *momentarily*! — dear, dear! After he looked up *administrate* in *Modern English Usage*, Mr. McEwen should have read what Fowler had to say about *momentarily*.

When commentators who introduce music programs on the radio say that the conductor will appear momentarily, I feel sorry for the people who have come to the concert expecting that the conductor would stay to direct the orchestra in the whole program and not just step onto the podium for a moment and then take off.

More frightening is the picture painted by the writer of a letter quoted by William Safire in *William Safire on Language*:

Every time an American stewardess tells me that my plane will take off momentarily, I have visions of kangaroo-hopping across the countryside to wherever I am going.

John F. Hatton  
Willowdale, Ont.

IN A MARCH LETTER, a Mr. Wayne Jones attacks Alec McEwen's "old-fashioned whining" about what's right and wrong in English usage. "Any word that is used," claims Jones, "is by definition a word." Well, Wayne, "mnpaxl ot ot tgunph on you";

that's new hip talk for "No, it most certainly is not." Language, like the living humans who create it, needs constant growth and change — yet, also like us, it has an objective existence that will die if stretched or denied too fast or too far. Jones's boyish eagerness to do away with "distinctions between words that are gradually becoming synonymous," and his linking of careful practices in linguistics with the tyrannical hypocrisy of Saddam Hussein, are so ridiculously overdone that it's hard to believe he's serious. Yet if he means his letter as a joke, it doesn't have quite the cleverness to come off as one.

Don't drop Alec McEwen, as Jones requests; drop Jones, and keep McEwen.

Paul R. Sheppard  
Brockville, Ont.

RE: CONTRACTIONS. Much smoother than the *amn't I?* suggested in Roger Burford Mason's letter (March) would be the maligned *ain't I?* It is clear, occurs in the frontal sinuses, brings the tongue tip forward, avoids the intrusion of the lips. A good colloquialism, I think.

John V. Hicks  
Prince Albert, Sask.

## Down with Fine Print

INSTEAD OF concerning itself with page counts ("Through Thick and Thin," March), I wish the publishing world would address the problem of print size. The serious book buyers on both sides of the Atlantic are aging — fast — and the upcoming generation is, er, "print challenged." To hang on to their few remaining readers, publishers need to look closely at the writing on the wall — and make it bigger.

Nicholas Fillem  
London, England

## Get Real, Not Perfect

WHILE I AGREED with many of the points Diane Schoemperlen made in her review of *Mothers Talk Back* ("Getting Real," March), some of her criticisms were out of focus. To call Margaret Dragu a "snob" is an oxymoron, as anyone with even minimal con-

tact with her would know. What Dragu was expressing is something a lot of new parents feel, a sense of connection (children being a great leveller) with people with whom they'd otherwise felt they shared little in common. That "naïve" questions and sharp responses were included is to the credit of the editors, Dragu, Sarah Sheard, and Susan Swan, who wanted to keep the conversational tone of the book, rather than preen it into some dry, academic tome. Interviewing, like parenting, is a process that we can't always predict, nor necessarily want to totally control. Getting "real" doesn't always mean getting "perfect."

Renee Rodin  
Vancouver

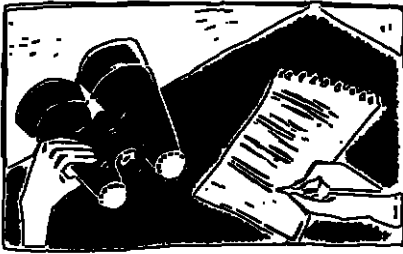
## Ugliness Contest

IT LOOKS like *Books in Canada* is having an ugliness contest on its letters pages these days. Eleanor Parkes's November correspondence started it off — I found her remarks offensive, so I wasn't surprised when the subject of them, Marlene Nourbese Philip, responded with a blast. Then along comes Richard Sanger in your April issue, who's so put off by Nourbese Philip's incivility (tut, tut!) that he whitewashes Parkes's comments as nothing more than "a succinct summary of the many rights and opportunities that well-educated Canadians like Nourbese Philip enjoy." To me, there's a nasty *be-grateful-for-what-this-country-has-given-you-or-get-out* tone to Parkes's letter; and she's clearly not talking about just any "well-educated Canadian," as Sanger innocuously puts it, but about a non-white immigrant who dares to show another side to the "accomplishments" of David Livingstone and the British Empire.

Ugliness, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. I find remarks that are, shall we say (politely, of course) "racially insensitive," far more morally objectionable than rudeness. I'll leave it to other *Books in Canada* readers to make their own judgement about the letters in question.

S. Hochstetler  
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.*



# Cowboyography

by DON GAYTON

THE NORTH AMERICAN West, with its enduring myths of frontier and cowboy, is pervaded by fiction, and Will James lived that fiction. He came west, assembled a complete, new personal reality, and in the end, saw the reality become a fate. Most of us allow fiction to penetrate only as far as our bookshelves, stopping it far short of personal identity. Will James did not. He created himself as a character: cowboy, painter, writer, western myth, victim.

I first became aware of James when I was a boy, reading his novel *Smoky, the Cow Horse*. The book was a handsome 1929 Scribner edition belonging to my father. He had read it as a boy too, when it was first published. *Smoky* was, and perhaps still is, the quintessential boy's illustrated adventure, in the tradition of G. A. Henry and Robert Louis Stevenson. The story features a lone rebellious figure, bonded to a half-wild horse, working with animals and against the elements, dealing rarely with other men and never with women. The prose of *Smoky*, as with all James's books, is written in western vernacular. The illustrations are strongly influenced by James's contemporary, Charles M. Russell, and the best of them rival that artist's work.

Thirty years after my first reading of *Smoky*, I began to run across references to Will James's shadowy beginnings in Canada. I was drawn in again, but the real hook this time was not the juvenile romance of the story, but the secret flows of Will James's personal identity, the springs of which were hidden somewhere in this western landscape.

Will James began life as another person. Ernest Nephtali Dufault was born in St. Nazaire, Quebec, in 1892. Family



*Will James in full dress at the Moir ranch near Ravenscrag, Saskatchewan*

accounts say young Dufault spent all his spare time sketching horses and devouring dime westerns. At the age of 15 he took the train west to Saskatchewan, consumed by the desire to be a cowboy. For the next four years (1907 to 1911) he moved around the southern Prairies, preparing for the

final break to the United States.

The Canadian Prairies would have been where the young Dufault saw the first real images of the West and cattle ranching. The short grass, dry coulees, and badlands of Saskatchewan and Alberta became his first templates, to which he carved and fitted his own

already powerful childhood vision. This is where he learned about horses and cattle and range, going from a gawky adolescent "not much good on a horse" to a skilled cowboy and horse-breaker.

In those four years he also shifted his language from French to western English. He dropped the francophone cadence of Ernest Nephtali Dufault in favour of the monosyllabic "Will James." (These clipped and plosive Anglo-American names were somehow significant; all the characters of James's stories have names like "Clint," "Dan," "Tom," and so on.) And he changed his identity, from Quebec immigrant to native horse-breaker.

Few people wrote things down in the southern Canadian Prairies in the early 1900s; as a place in time it makes for poor history, but good fiction. Accounts of Dufault/James in those four years have him filing a homestead claim near the tiny francophone community of Val Marie, Saskatchewan; working as a cowboy for the vast 76 Ranch; wintering with a ranching family and then starting a spread of his own near Ravenscrag, in the Cypress Hills country; working at a line camp near Sage Creek, Alberta; and spending time in a Maple Creek, Sask., jail.

One of the few artefacts of James's stay in Western Canada is the photograph above, taken by John Moir, the Saskatchewan rancher who hosted James in the winter of 1911. (Moir's son, "Mac" Moir, a poet who now lives in Calgary, has the original.)

James found a mentor while in Saskatchewan: a fellow Québécois by the name of Pierre Beaupré, who probably helped James with his language transition and basic cowboy skills. Beaupré and James filed the Val Marie homestead claim jointly. Beaupré was an intermediary, and significant enough to James that he wrote him into *The Lone Cowboy* (1930), his autobiographical fiction, as an adoptive father.

In *The Lone Cowboy*, James's parents are made into Texans who have bought a ranch in Montana. They are both killed when James is quite young, and "Bopy," a friend of the family, adopts and raises the child. Then Beaupré

himself dies, drowning in an ice-filled Montana river. This fiction leaves James totally free of the encumbrances of birth and family heritage, and also explains his lifelong francophone accent.

The actual Dufault family — father, mother, and five siblings — is cut off in favour of the Montana fiction. After leaving Quebec, James returned there only twice in his life. The first trip was made about a year after he left, probably a social visit to show off the new cowboy gear and the new mystique. The second trip, made when James was beginning to gain national recognition for his writing and sketching, was to burn all the letters he had written to his family, and to swear them to secrecy about his real identity.

James wrote and published a dozen books between 1926 and 1942, all of them about horses and cowboys, and all about himself, or rather the self he created. Place names are virtually nonexistent in his texts, as are any verifiable historical events or figures. His "autobiography" is no exception. This man craved fame for the James persona and total anonymity for the Dufault.

Will James's obsession with an anachronistic, dime-novel West, his secret identity, and a lifelong fear of the law (after two stints in jail) propelled this unlikely man into the realms of fiction and art. He created anonymous *tableaux* of corral, sagebrush, and bucking horse, and inserted himself into them. The cowboys of his drawings all look the same: long-waisted men with bowed legs and spurred boots, clad in white shirts and black vests, showing aquiline, hawk-nosed faces in profile. They are all Ernest Dufault, idealized into Will James.

James does refer to Canada in his works (*The Lone Cowboy*, *Winter Months in a Cow Camp*), but the reality is of course reversed: he writes himself coming into Canada as a young man on the run from US law. He mentions no place names, but the "Cypress Ranch" of *Winter Months* is quite possibly the famous 76 Ranch, where James did work and which, in James's youth, covered a good chunk of southern Saskatchewan.

James rode on into Montana, Nevada, Wyoming, Arizona, and, eventually, to fame as a writer/illustrator. His works provided readers with a clean, romantic vision of an era just past, and his persona let them believe it still existed. As was natural, Will James gravitated to Hollywood, first as a stunt rider and then as a collaborator on movie scripts about himself. He suffered the usual dislocations of the American celebrity, made worse by his fear of discovery and a habit of bingeing on hard liquor.

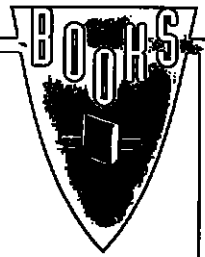
By the late 1930s, his career in decline from drink and illness, James reached back to the Montana of his imagined ancestry and bought a ranch with the profits from his books. Even that did not give him peace. His health continued to deteriorate and he died in 1942 of chronic liver failure.

The exile must project himself into a new culture. The rural exile must project himself into a new landscape as well. Saskatchewan and Alberta provided Will James with the first real Western landscapes; these would imprint over the barns and orchard-grass pastures of settled Quebec, already blurred by the strength of his youthful vision of the West. Yet the real landscapes of exile will never quite match the immigrant's vision of them, so he condemns himself to an endless search for the perfect diorama. Good work for a painter.

At the age of 15 my father also crossed the country on a westbound train, alone. That was 25 years after James did, and the circumstances were much different. Whether he took his copy of *Smoky* with him, and what particular combination of landscape and desire his head was full of, I am not given to know. But in considering my father's solitary train trip through western space, I think I hear a faint echo of Will James.

Fiction inevitably becomes personal. A few books will move beyond the bookshelf and intrude on the margins of the reader's life, as James's books have in mine. They have linked father, author, and son through reality and through a set of nested dreams.





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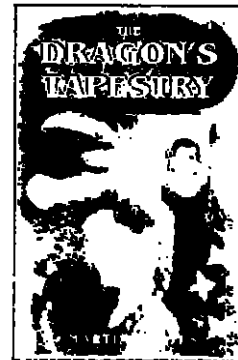
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# Reading Down Under

by RUSSELL McDOUGALL

**W**RITERS' WEEK AT the Adelaide Festival of Arts in South Australia (March 1 to 6) began in unseasonable rain this year, which, given the traditional outdoor venue, might have been expected to keep the crowds away. Instead, the largest crowd yet to assemble for Australia's major literary event made a pilgrimage down to Adelaide's riverside gardens to hear their chosen writers (around 60) read from and discuss their work.

Spilling out from under the marquee, standing in the downpour when they grew too many for the available cover, more than 3,000 people gathered on the first day to hear Oliver Sacks, the London-born New York professor of clinical neurology and

author of *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* and *Awakenings*. It was the first time Sacks had attended a writers' conference, and he was nervously — he himself might have said obsessively — generous with his time.

Readers arrived in similar numbers on the second, equally wet day to hear Alice Walker, whose children's book, *Finding the Green Stone*, was launched later in the week. In the evening Walker's second appearance found her sharing the stage of the Festival Theatre with Australia's Sally Morgan, the author of *My Place*. This autobiographical novel of a modern Aboriginal quest for identity in the face of institutionalized assimilation and erasure has captured the

attention and guilt-inspired fascination of white Australia, while at the same time giving a sense of empowerment to much of the Aboriginal community.

Interspersed with these and other popular "Meet the Author" events were, as usual, the panel sessions: this year, for example, on the historical novel, where the speakers included Jim Crace, Rose Tremain, and Zoë Fairbairns (England), Faith Bandler (Australia), and Orhan Pamuk (Turkey); on biography — Brian Boyd (New Zealand), Richard Holmes (England), Oliver MacDonagh, and David Marr (Australia); on screenwriting; teaching creative writing; and on writing in the gardening, scientific, and cartoon and comic genres.

In recent years the organizing committee has cautiously — and very successfully — courted the publishing industry, taking great care to remain independent of publishers' demands while programming events likely to attract not only readers but also writers (other than those formally invited to participate), as well as their publishers and agents. This year's Adelaide Festival featured a panel session on the role of the editor, in which four well-known editors were put to

the rest of deciding what to do with a piece of fiction "faked" by a well-known (though, on this occasion, anonymous) author secreted in the crowd. The other main "industry" event, apart from the many book launches, both on and off site, and the many more parties, was a discussion by a panel of writers, booksellers, agents, and publishers on the pricing of books. (Australia, the second largest book-buying nation per head of population, pays higher prices than most other countries for its books.)

Important though drawing cards such as Sacks and Walker and Morgan obviously are, it is partly this balance of events that continues to account for the huge success of Writers' Week. Because of the mix of invited and surprise guests, there is always an air of the unexpected in this literary community. Then there is the venue itself, not so wonderful in the rain, but pure delight in the usually balmy days of March — and this year, luckily, the rain had cleared by Wednesday. In the shady gardens of the river parkland, one can listen to one's favourite authors, or discover new reading paths to follow, while sipping champagne and nibbling on quail or some other culinary delicacy prepared specially for the occasion by Kath Kerry, one of the most talented chefs in a city that is the gastronomic and wine capital of Australia. And one can rush down these new reading paths immediately, forsaking other pleasures for the book tent, where all of the writers attending — and many others besides — have their books on sale.

Why, this year even the Canadian books arrived on time! Adelaide audiences (and students and teachers of Canadian literature throughout the country) have grown used to Canadian books not appearing, to visiting Canadian authors so embarrassed by their publishers' indifference to international markets that they can hardly conceal their dismay. Supporters of Canadian literature overseas inevitably find themselves moaning on the phone to the Canadian High Commission, whose cultural attachés know only too well how badly the major publishers of Canadian literature have let down their authors in the international marketplace. In a country apparently bent on deconstruction — as Canada sometimes seems to be from an Australian perspective — not all absences are enlightening, or

even full of playful potential; but it is a pleasure to be able to report the complete absence this year of Canadian disasters of absence at Writers' Week. Not only did the Canadian poet Phyllis Webb arrive to hold captive her audience in Adelaide; so did her books, which sold out on the day of her "Meet the Author" reading.

On Tuesday, March 3, Webb was one of an international panel of poets — which included Michel Deguy (France), Alan Gould (Australia), Miroslav Holub (Czechoslovakia), and Alice Walker — reading from their work. That same night she read at a small Spanish restaurant that had given itself up to Writers' Week. Two days later she had the stage to herself, drawing a considerable audience despite the simultaneous session in the second marquee, where Paul Davies, Miroslav Holub, and others were holding forth about "Chaos and Creativity." And that evening she performed again, accompanied by Thea Astley, the Australian novelist, on the pleasure-boat "Popeye" as it cruised through the parkland on the Torrens River. She had already given two readings the week before, a thousand miles away at the University of New England in Armidale, where there is a very active Canadian studies group. And from Adelaide, after a brief stop in Melbourne, she was going on to another literary festival in Auckland, New Zealand.

The real surprises of Writers' Week, however, were political. Australia is in the midst of a great republican debate, fuelled during the Queen's recent visit by our prime minister, Paul Keating, who offended many in England (and some here in Australia) with his comments. His remarks about Britain's readiness to abandon Australia at the time of the fall of Singapore in 1942, and by its recent entry into the European Common Market, were coupled with a call for an awareness that modern Australia's ties must be more with Asia and less with Europe. But even more controversial was Keating's transgression of royal protocol: gently guiding the Queen through the crowds of Parliament House, he had dared to touch Her Majesty, even to the extent of placing his arm around her.

Two other firsts occurred this year at Writers' Week, each an indication of the profile that the event now enjoys, and each carrying a warning that it may be the politi-

cians rather than the publishers who need to be kept at arm's length in the future. First, Governor General Bill Hayden, an acknowledged atheist, socialist, and republican, helped to launch the former diplomat Alison Broinowski's *"The Yellow Lady": Australian Perspectives of Asia*, and fanned the flames of the republican row with his comments that "instead of becoming the best-informed English-speaking nation about the Asia-Pacific region, as we were well placed to do, some in Australia seemed to shrink from the challenge, replacing knowledge with orientalist fantasies."

But the best was yet to come. On the final day of Writers' Week, Prime Minister Keating arrived — unscheduled and unannounced — to launch his friend Rodney Hall's paperback edition of *The Second Bridegroom*. Rumour had got around, and the crowd swelled to possibly the largest of the week to hear the man who regards himself as the Placido of politics (the press made much of the fact that Domingo himself was in town for a concert performance) perhaps make a statement about funding for the arts. No policy statement was forthcoming; but a welcome — and new — note in the republican orchestration-of-the-nation debate was struck when, launching this book about first Aboriginal contact, the PM noted: "We have to come to terms with Aboriginal Australia, pre- and post-European. Until we do this — until we start to make some real progress towards closing the gap in both attitudes and living standards — I think there will always be a feeling among us that maybe we don't quite belong... that we're simply here to make forgeries of the Old World."

Reading from the reviews of Hall's novel, Keating noted that, despite their high praise, one hasn't really been "reviewed" until one appears in the London tabloids ("Hands off our Queen!"). But there was a more powerful recognition involved in Keating's presence at Writers' Week, for, as he himself noted, the republican question is, while hardly new to party politics in Australia, much older in its literary context. Literature precedes, sets the agenda to some degree: "That is one of the great virtues of the arts and why a country is healthier when they flourish. They can provide us with a truer vision of ourselves." ♦

# Lying about Dad

*A short history of Prairie literature that separates the wheat from the chaff*

by MAURICE MIERAU

A SHORT HISTORY always makes artists insecure about their parentage, and the history of Prairie writing in Canada is very short — most of the gifted writers from the region are alive and publishing right now. Prairie writers, like Prairie politicians, would like to kill their symbolic dads, but they're not sure who he is — an ugly American, a snotty Brit, and a slick eastern bureaucrat are all leading possibilities. In the meantime Prairie writers keep on making up stories, with Dad or without him.

For the last decade the Alberta-born novelist, critic, poet, and professor Robert Kroetsch has been the most important literary intellectual on the Prairies. Many of his most important ideas come from Europe; Kroetsch is fascinated by European literary theory, all of it wisdom from the East. For Kroetsch the European past is also oppressive, a father whose disappearance would be appreciated. This tension produces a need for an alternative past for the rebellious son.

Kroetsch is both a prodigal son and a founding father. His experiments with poetic form and esoteric foreign theories have had enormous influence within the region, and part of that influence has been a distinctive rewriting (Kroetsch calls it "uninventing") of Prairie literary history. The need for this revisionist history stems from the fact that Kroetsch is part of the first generation of Prairie writers who have sustained careers by writing in and about this place, and who are, consequently, dogged by a sense of cultural illegitimacy. Most Prairie writers now in their 50s and 60s, like Kroetsch, are professors of English literature (generally white and male) whose cultural fathers — also professors — told them that their experience was too insignificant to write about, and that the real literary world revolved around bright lights and big cities in other countries. In rejecting this pseudo-cosmopolitanism, these writers claimed their artistic birthright by writing out of their own places and lives; however, they also inherited a traumatic anxiety about the legitimacy of their work, a syndrome sometimes passed on to the younger generation.

In the case of the polite Canadian Prairies, "uninventing" or rewriting the literary past often involves inflating reputations and creating a tradition or canon where there really isn't one. We are more willing to lie about our father than shoot him; that is what distinguishes Canadian literary history from American. These lies

about the past are proffered, usually unconsciously, in order to prove the aesthetic and historical legitimacy of contemporary writing. This is the only explanation for the Prairie literati's continuing fascination with unspeakably mediocre writers like Frederick Philip Grove, about whom I will comment a little later.

The Prairie obsession with legitimacy is also a function of the fact that so many of the writers in this region are academics. There is nothing wrong with academic writers, but when there is almost no variety in the professional and social backgrounds of the writers from a region there is also less variety in their work. Of the five established literary presses on the Prairies, three have boards composed primarily of university English professors, and many of these same people are also prolific writers and influential teachers of creative writing. Among this group there is a strong belief in the power of credentials to bestow legitimacy and to write a correct version of cultural history. For example, a few years ago Wayne Tefs, a novelist and member of the editorial board of Winnipeg's Turnstone Press, wrote a letter to the local paper complaining that one of their book reviews had been written by someone who lacked a Ph.D. The implication was clearly that only designated experts are culturally credible or legitimate, a view that is just as unhealthy as telling a young writer that his or her stories must be set in New York or Toronto rather than Alberta.

Ironically, the academic attempt to legitimize the present by inflating the reputations of dead writers distracts from the many remarkable Prairie writers who have published in the last 30 years or so. Prairie lit crit has not overcome its enthusiasm for the inept prose of F. P. Grove, which Robert Kroetsch describes as "beautiful and radical." Rudy Wiebe, a tremendously ambitious and intelligent novelist, has also fallen under Grove's spell, crediting him with "wisdom" and artistry; one can only assume that the longing for Dad makes for the adoption of strange uncles. Grove's style ranges from the merely ugly, as in this description from *Settlers of the Marsh* (1925): "Quietly he got up and drew a blanket over it that had been he," to the unintentionally ludicrous, as in this bit of melodrama from *The Master of the Mill* (1944): "Painfully, the senator awoke to reality. He was not Sam; this was not Maud. It was that Maud who was Lady Clark; and he was a man over eighty years old."

By setting up Grove as the original realist in the Prairie tradition, many academic critics have attempted to marginalize contemporary realist writers, especially women. After all, Grove got there first, it's already been done, and even though Dad has disappeared we've got a French New Novelist uncle — or was he a

South American? Either provides a handy role model. David Arnason's 1986 essay "Leaving the Farm: Contemporary Saskatchewan Fiction" typifies this trend. Arnason argues that three Saskatchewan writers — Geoffrey Ursell, David Williams, and Guy Vanderhaeghe — have an "informing vision" that makes their work of larger interest than writers of "realism" like Sharon Butala, Edna Alford, and David Carpenter.

The dichotomy between vision and realism offered by Arnason is, I think, tendentious. Butala has shown in her latest books, *The Fourth Archangel* and *Fever*, and even in the earlier work that Arnason discusses, a vision that can't be summed up by a narrow "realist" manifesto. Arnason praises Ursell's *Perdue, or How The West Was Lost* for its vision, but this seems to be a clear case of a prodigal writer somewhat arbitrarily picking an alternative tradition — in this case by emulating Gabriel García Márquez's famous style. Kroetsch found this alternative past first

— as Arnason points out — by reproducing García Márquez's style in his 1978 novel, *What the Crow Said*. Kroetsch's book is funnier than Ursell's, but both novels seem unduly preoccupied with themselves as literature. Visionary they aren't. Similarly, David Williams's novels are so suffused with the influence of William Faulkner that at times their passions and concerns are almost suffocated. Edna Alford's *A Sleep Full of Dreams* (1981) is part of the (recent) Prairie tradition of the linked short-story collection, and her unflinching realism is as visionary as anything written in the Prairies. *The Garden of Eloise Loon* (1986) is similarly concerned with the dreamlike realism of the elderly and isolated; Alford is a powerful writer.

The collection of criticism *Contemporary Manitoba Writers* (1990), edited by Kenneth Hughes, sets up a "realist" bogeyman in a much more aggressive way than Arnason's essay. Hughes, a professor of English, makes it clear in his introduction to the collection that "contemporary" means post-realism, and he imposes a very narrow definition of realism in order to exclude those who don't fit his little curriculum. Manitoba writers who work in more traditional realist modes are, predictably, ignored in Hughes's book. These include fine fiction writers like Ed Kleiman, whose short fiction memorializes the Jewish north end of Winnipeg in the 1940s and '50s, and Jake MacDonald.

Even though I am arguing that the history of Prairie writing in Canada is relatively short, there are nonetheless three distinct groups or, if you like, generations of Prairie writers. The first could be called the pioneers. Henry Kreisel's remark that "all discussion of the literature produced in the Canadian West must of necessity

begin with the impact of the landscape upon the mind" applies particularly well to this group. They published their important work before 1960, and include John Marlyn, W. O. Mitchell, Martha Ostenso, Sinclair Ross, Gabrielle Roy, and Wallace Stegner. All of them are concerned with establishing a particular Prairie landscape in their work. This group's published work is scattered over a long period of time, and a number of them have had essentially one-book careers. The second generation is a relatively small group that mostly began publishing in the 1960s. The list is still mainly composed of fiction writers, but there are a few other genres represented as well: Robert Kroetsch, Patrick Lane, Margaret Laurence, Eli Mandel, Ken Mitchell, John Newlove, George Ryga, Miriam Waddington, Rudy Wiebe, and Adele Wiseman are among the most significant writers in this group. Finally the third generation, by far the largest group, began publishing in the '70s. This list (necessarily incomplete) includes poets, playwrights, children's writers, historians, and more women and ethnic writers than ever before: Edna Alford, David Arnason, Byrna Barclay, Ven Begamudré, Sandra Birdsell, Di Brandt, Lois Braun, Martha Brooks, Sharon Butala, Dennis Cooley, Lorna Crozier, Beatrice Culleton, Daniel Dancocks, Peter Eyvindson, Brad Fraser, Patrick Friesen, Kristjana Gunnars, Carol Matas, Bruce McManus, Howard Palmer, Carol Shields, Andrew Suknaski, W. D. Valgardson, Aritha van Herk, Guy Vanderhaeghe, and Fred Wah.

The pioneering group that broke the ground for Prairie literature is headed by Sinclair Ross, whose 1941 novel *As For Me and My House* has had a huge impact on the writers of this region. Significantly, this novel had very little impact until it was reprinted in 1957; the significance of Canadian or Prairie literature was not really appreciated until after the war. Ross's novel displayed very sophisticated technical control while also dealing with a Depression-era regional setting. Writers as diverse as Lorna Crozier and David Williams have been attracted to this book, which, unlike Grove's *oeuvre*, demonstrates both a high level of craft and specifically regional content.

Wallace Stegner, most of whose career has been spent in the United States, made his reputation with a memoir about his Saskatchewan boyhood, *Wolf Willow* (1962). Like Ross's *As For Me and My House*, this book was important for the sophisticated way in which it made use of a prairie setting. John Marlyn's *Under the Ribs of Death* (1957), while not as accomplished as either Ross's or Stegner's work, is important for being a pioneering "immigrant novel" and also one of the first Prairie novels rooted in an urban reality. Gabrielle Roy's richly lyrical evocation of both the Saint Boniface, Manitoba, landscape in *Street of Riches*, and the Interlake region in *Where Nests the Water Hen* give her an important place in this first generation as well, even though her novels were translated from the French.

Comic writers are rare in this early group, with W. O. Mitchell clearly being the leading one. His 1947 novel *Who Has Seen the Wind* made his reputation. The "Jake and the Kid" series of radio scripts he wrote between 1949 and 1957 were also a very important influence on the Prairie writers who would start publishing in the '60s and '70s. Guy Vanderhaeghe, although a more sophisticated writer in some ways, follows in Mitchell's footsteps with his



F. P. Grove



Sinclair Ross

gift for outrageous vernacular dialogue.

Paul Hiebert is the only other comic writer of note in this group. His satirical biography of a fictional poet, *Sarah Binks* (1947), is a very healthy and funny outsider's view of the emerging Prairie literati; his book combines objectivity and self-loathing in a way that is characteristic of Prairie humour up to and including the Edmonton comedy troupe Three Dead Trolls in a Baggy.

In the second generation of writers, the major figures are all fiction writers. Margaret Laurence picked up the chronicling of small-town Prairie life, with all its natural beauty and moral hypocrisy, where Sinclair Ross left off. She also established the Prairic tradition of the book of linked short stories, most notably with *A Bird in the House* (1970); Sandra Birdsell's and Edna Alford's powerful collections are unimaginable without Laurence. *The Stone Angel* (1964) and *The Diviners* (1974) are Laurence's masterpieces; both these novels combine unshakable moral conviction with tremendous sympathy for a diverse range of characters. Laurence is probably the most enduring presence of anyone who has written literature from this region. She did not share the academic preoccupation with establishing a canon of precursors; she simply wrote.

Rudy Wiebe's career started with a flare of controversy in the Canadian Mennonite community over his novel *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962), which portrays conflict within a conservative Mennonite village. Wiebe has a passion for the history and geography of Alberta and Saskatchewan, and he is also fascinated with extreme moral and psychological situations; these interests infuse his writing with an explosive stylistic energy. *The Blue Mountains of China* (1970) and *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973) are probably his most important books. Wiebe's ambition to build what he calls "giant artifacts" in the manner of the great Russian novelists makes him an interesting case study in relation to the legitimacy-anxiety of other Prairie writers of his generation. Instead of attempting to invent a literary tradition where little or none exists, Wiebe works with aboriginal, oral, and geographic tradition so that his work is rooted in a place instead of a rag-tag assortment of texts.

Robert Kroetsch, in spite of having won a Governor General's Award for fiction (for *The Studhorse Man*, 1969), has emerged as one of the most interesting poets of his generation over the last 15 years. As his *Completed Field Notes* (1989) demonstrates, Kroetsch's poetry is wide-ranging in style and content, and has changed the way people write and think about the genre here. Eli Mandel, John Newlove, and Patrick Lane have all published over a longer period than Kroetsch. These poets' emergence showed younger writers that lyricism, experimentation, and regional content could all co-exist.

The writers I am identifying as third generation are the most numerous and the most prolific. In Alberta, Aritha van Herk is a fiction writer who has done exciting work, starting with *Judith* (1978). Recently van Herk seems obsessed with a legitimacy-anxiety that usually afflicts only male writer/academics, and leads her to indulge in bizarre and opaque "theory" such as her latest book, *In Visible Ink: Crypto-frictions* (1991). Kristjana Gunnars's work spans poetry, translation, and fiction, much of it concerned with her Icelandic heritage; recently her experimental novel *The Prowler* attracted considerable attention, displaying as it does an interest in literary—and moving—self-examination. Howard Palmer and

the late Daniel Dancocks, also Albertans, are the only popular historians this region has yet produced. Sharon Pollock is still the biggest name in dramatic writing to come out of the third generation, and Edmonton's Fringe Festival has spawned much talent and many other festivals as well.

Saskatchewan boasts a veritable legion of talented fiction writers, of whom the most notable are Guy Vanderhaeghe and Sharon Butala. Vanderhaeghe's first book, *Man Descending*, gave him a national reputation, and his tremendous gift for dialogue and polished style make him a writer who should command international attention. Sharon Butala's recent novel, *The Fourth Archangel*, is something of a departure from the more restrained style of her earlier books. David Carpenter is also an accomplished stylist, most notably in his novella "Luce" (1985). Andrew Suknaski's anecdotal style, Lorna Crozier's delicate lyricism and punchy humour, Anne Szumigalski's prose poems, and Fred Wah's Black Mountain rhythms provide contrasting and distinctive poetic voices from Saskatchewan, and there's an army of emerging talent there as well. Ven Begamudré's fiction is rooted in what he calls his "transcultural" heritage, East Indian and Canadian, which is best captured in *A Planet of Eccentrics* (1991); like this whole group of Saskatchewan writers, Begamudré is certainly not caught up in legitimacy-anxiety.

Manitoba has produced a plethora of interesting writers in the last decade alone. The first major short-story writer of the '70s was W. D. Valgardson, whose collection *Bloodflowers* (1973) announced the arrival of a mature and self-confident talent. Patrick Friesen's poetry and Sandra Birdsell's short fiction are the major milestones of Manitoba literature over the last 15 years; both came out of the increasingly literary Mennonite community, and both are overdue for Governor General's awards. Di Brandt's poetry, most recently *Agnes in the sky* (1991), comes from this same context, and owes much to Friesen's groundbreaking long poem *The Shunning* (1980). David Arnason and Dennis Cooley have made their mark as writers and editors for Turnstone Press. Arnason has published fiction, poetry, and criticism; he has an engaging talent for narrative experiments best demonstrated in *The Circus Performers' Bar* (1984). Cooley is a prolific poet and critic whose book of essays, *The Vernacular Muse* (1988) represents an important statement on Prairie writing.

Although the preoccupation with legitimacy remains a problem for some, most of this latest crop of Prairie writers has dispensed with the anxiety about ancestry that plagued previous generations. This group is attending, more than any before, to the business of creating a literature as spacious and varied as the Prairie landscape itself. ♦



Rudy Wiebe



Margaret Laurence



Robert Kroetsch

# The Place Where Words Stop

*A sense of the land as a living presence underlies Sharon Butala's depiction of the natural world*

by  
ALLAN  
CASEY

**S**HARON BUTALA is the author of two collections of short fiction — *Queen of the Headaches* (Coteau, 1986) and *Fever* (HarperCollins, 1990) — and four novels: *The Gates of the Sun* (Fifth House, 1986), *Luna* (Fifth House, 1988), *Upstream* (Fifth House, 1991), and *The Fourth Archangel*, which has just been published by HarperCollins.

Interviewed recently in Saskatoon, Butala seemed slightly out of her element, not that a pastel motel-room in Saskatoon could be anyone's element. She's driven the five hours from her ranch near Eastend, which lies far to the southwest. Butala has many errands to run during her days in town, but mostly she's here to address the International Women's Day celebration on the weekend. The organizers can't know what an iconoclast is en route to the podium. Butala would open her speech by reminding the audience that, in the years before her books began to come out, she hadn't been welcome at such orthodox feminist gatherings. Her views on women were too traditional. Or subversive. She would modestly assail prominent feminists such as Germaine Greer and Simone de Beauvoir, and she would cry while recounting how she'd been a victim of date rape long before the term was invented. Allan Casey talked with Butala not only about feminism and her new novel, *The Fourth Archangel*, but about autobiography, short-grass prairie, and being traditional.

**BiC:** *I hear you have a bone to pick with some feminists. Or they have one to pick with you. How could you get in such a predicament? Isn't Luna far and away the Prairie woman's best-loved self-portrait?*

**Sharon Butala:** Down south where I live, the women phone me to say they've read it, that they gave it to their daughters to read, and their mothers and sisters. Those women really liked that book. But no one else did. It's the only one of my books that wasn't even nominated for a prize.

**BiC:** *Were urban feminists bothered by your main character, Selena, a traditional rancher's wife devoted more to her family than to herself?*

**Butala:** When I wrote Selena, I was trying to say, look, this woman is honourable. She's leading the life that women have led down through the centuries in cultures all over the world. She's leading it uncritically, and she shouldn't be uncritical. But I wanted to give her the respect that's due her for the way she's built a world. The women down south don't question their lives out

loud every day, because if they did their world would collapse. And I don't blame them for that. That's the role of a writer, to look at society and be critical. And if those very same women have read *Luna* and liked it, then it's partly because I didn't hit too hard. I didn't say, you can't live like this.



**BiC:** *But urban feminists would tell them how to live!*

**Butala:** If you read the female creation legend that's central to *Luna*, that's about the harshest statement possible about women's situation on this planet. Feminists are not going to object totally to the book because that legend is in there. But what I have come to accept, and what some feminists object to, is that we should be celebrating our differences from one another, and that we are different from men.... And women do have power. Men have this formalized power that we all know and can see, and that we all hate with good reason. They have power over the structures of society and there's just no denying it. But women have another kind of power that comes out of formal powerlessness, I guess. They find other ways to be powerful. Sometimes that can be very harmful, but it can also be very good. Wise women have been around through the ages, and they are as powerful as any man simply by what they know and how they express it.

**BiC:** *Your fiction must trouble the proponents of absolute equality. At times the male and female characters hardly seem to belong to the same species. They even get separate books: Luna was the female counterpart to your ostensibly male history of ranching in The Gates of the Sun.*

**Butala:** Yes, I can't say that's not true. It's what interests me, and it's my interpretation of male-female relationships in North America right now. And we're better off than most parts of the world by a long shot. But I feel ready — I'm going to be 52 this summer and I'm starting to feel old — to move beyond my own limited personal experience and to start writing about male-female relationships that are on a more equal, purer level. My new novel, the one I've got in my head, is going to be about the mid-life crisis.

**BiC:** *Doesn't Germaine Greer say women are supposed to love menopause and getting older?*

**Butala:** Oh yeah, right. It would be better if our cultural icons would tell us the truth rather than just taking positions and then later on saying, "Well, you know, at the time I wrote that book, uh..." I'm willing to be accountable for every word I've ever written. That's what you do if you write, and if you can't do that, shut up.

**BiC:** *It bothers you that some of those cultural icons grew up isolated from day-to-day, working-class women's reality. What was your early life all about?*

**Butala:** I was born in Nipawin, as were three of my four sisters, at an outpost hospital, an old house that I think was run by the Red Cross where Mom would come down to have her babies. Dad had a sawmill in the bush north of there, and that's where I was raised. The first four years of my life were in complete wilderness. I think now, though it wasn't until I came down to the ranch to live that I realized it, that this must have been a profound experience and that where I'm heading for now comes out of that. Anyway, that's where we were, and we were poor, really poor.

**BiC:** *Does that explain your loving depiction of the natural world? As a whole, your books are the most wonderfully detailed bestiary. You know the name of every shrub, rock, bird, and critter on the land. And the short-grass prairie you describe is a long way from the boreal forest where you were born.*

**Butala:** When I married my husband Peter and moved to Eastend, I spent one full year just riding with him in the truck. It was the first time in my adult life that I hadn't had to be at work every day. I went everywhere he went, did everything he did, and I just kept asking questions like a four-year-old. I never stopped asking, and he loved explaining things. It took me about a year to learn what I needed to know.... But it's more a question of liking to be out in the wilderness, whatever kind it might be, and having a sense of the land as a real living presence and of everything on it, even yourself, as being a part of the whole world. If you can approach it in the right way, you can begin to communicate with it. As it says in *The Fourth Archangel*, "This is a place where words stop."

**BiC:** *You wrote a novel when you were just nine. But your writing didn't start again until shortly after you went to Eastend in 1976. What brought you there?*

**Butala:** Peter was born and raised there. He's never lived anywhere else. When we talked about getting married, there was never any question about his moving. I sold my house, I quit my job at the university, I left my friends and family behind, I went to a place five hours from the nearest person I knew.

**BiC:** *Are you still treated as a newcomer?*

**Butala:** No, but I will never be treated as a member of the community on the same basis as people who were born there. I struggled very hard to be one, and finally realized one day that it was not ever going to be possible. I would only kill what was unique in me, and I would never be fully accepted anyway. I decided the only way to survive there was to take the place on my own terms. I'm a ranch wife, I married into a family that has been there for a couple of generations, so I do some of the things they do. If we have a branding, then I have the women in my kitchen, though they come less and less every year. All of the women have jobs off the farm now. Anyway, they phone me from the hall and say, well, it's your turn to wash dishes for the fowl supper, I go in and wash dishes; they say, you need to bake three pies, I bake three pies. There are certain things I support and I go there on those people's terms. But I tell everybody that just because I'm home every day doesn't mean I'm available every day. And the women have stopped trying to be my friends. I've found certain ones, and they've found me. But they are kind of offbeat people, kind of the peripheral ones just like me. And I've found that my way of contributing to the community is through the Eastend Arts Council. I'm one of the founding members.

**BiC:** *Maybe people are spooked by you because you understand them so well.*

**Butala:** Well, lots of them don't read the books, so no problem.

**BiC:** *Hearing about your real life is very corroborative. Your writing is so personal that I can't help inventing a biography for you based on it. I get a strong image of your first husband from reading Queen of the Headaches or Fever, for instance.*

**Butala:** You might be interested to know I was in Saskatoon recently, and one of the main purposes of the visit was to have a reunion with him after all these years. We had this encounter that most people only dream of having.

**BiC:** *People dream of reunions with their ex?*

**Butala:** When you believe there has been an injustice, you dream of the day when you might redress it in some way, or where you get a chance to say all the things you didn't get to say, or hear all the things you didn't get to hear, to sort it out, to make sense of it, and that's what happened.

**BiC:** *The very thing your main character longs to do in "Justice," the story in Fever. Does your ex-husband read your books?*

**Butala:** I don't think he has read all of *Fever*, which is the one that...

**BiC:** *The one that he needs to read?*

**Butala:** Yes. But I think he has read "Justice." It wouldn't matter either way. Because I can't know how he interprets anything he reads. I can't know how he remembers. Even my older sister, I said something to her one day about one of the stories being my interpretation of what happened, and she flared up at me and told me that wasn't what happened. She had a completely different version. That's one of the things that I'm learning about people: they know different things than I know.

**BiC:** *Your female characters are amazingly adept at reading people. They can decode the most subtle body language, or verbal inflection. As writers do.*

**Butala:** Most women have to be acute readers of other people. It's that whole realm of unstructured power that women have: this is how they get it, by being good readers. I wouldn't say it's any sort of gift. It's just what you have to learn. Now, some people are a whole lot better at it than others, and writers better be damn good at it. My kind of writer, anyway. And I know men who are really good at it. I mean, they scare me. Rudy Wiebe, for instance.

**BiC:** *We're beginning to blur the line between fact and fiction. You have an essay in the works about that — one with a wonderful title.*

**Butala:** "Persephone Grows Up, Shakes Off Men, Goes into Self-Analysis and Becomes a Writer." It's still sitting on my desk. When *Fever* was published, everybody thought it was autobiography, and I began to get the sense that, in people's minds, to write autobiography is to be an inferior kind of writer. I wanted to defend it as a

very important kind of writing, one that is probably even more important than the kind where you invent a whole world.

**BiC:** *If we are to believe the dust-jacket, Upstream is your only truly autobiographical novel.*

**Butala:** It deals with my family history in that my father was a French Canadian and my mother wasn't, and with some of the memories of growing up a French-Canadian kid who didn't speak French, and as a Catholic kid with a mother who didn't believe in Catholicism, and a father who had no way of separating Catholicism from his blood.

**BiC:** *But it was because of Fever that people started accusing you of writing autobiography.*

**Butala:** That was different. "Persephone Grows Up..." would not have come out of *Upstream*, because *Upstream* is the kind of thing that every writer does. *Fever* is not what every writer does, or what every writer swears they don't do — and I'm saying I do. The only thing that counts for a writer of fiction is to say something about how the world is, and to say it in such a way that other people recognize themselves and say, I'm not alone. The only way is to be purely and completely authentic. It's much harder to do that than to invent a world and people it with characters that you've never met. I know this is an argument that's never going to be resolved in the literary world. There were times writing some of the stories in *Fever* when I felt as if I was just a funnel for the Great Creative Flow, whatever that is, and that it was just going through me into the typewriter. And those are the things, of course, for which I am accused of being merely autobiographical.

**BiC:** *Let's go back to the land. Though you have become one of their spokespersons, you are quite critical of farmers.*

**Butala:** Some kinds of farmer. It's been said that no area in North America, and perhaps on the face of the earth, has been so radically altered as southern Saskatchewan. You can drive for miles and not find a blade of grass or a tree that somebody didn't plant. I am able, because we have stretches of land that nobody's touched except to graze cattle and horses, to imagine how it must once have been.

**BiC:** *You'd like to see it go back the way it was.*

**Butala:** *West* magazine, which used to be distributed with the *Globe and Mail* out of Vancouver, called me up a couple of years ago. They said it was about time somebody who actually lived on the land wrote about it, rather than hiring someone from the big city to go out and do it. So they got this controversial and unexpected essay out of me, which got four magazine-award nominations. In it, I say that the whole Palliser Triangle should never have been ploughed up and it's time to give it up now.

**BiC:** *I bet even the people who don't read your books in Eastend got wind of that.*



**Butala:** I was afraid to answer the phone for about a month after the article came out. But the only phone calls and letters I got were in agreement. *On the one hand, I feel very angry about what's happened to this beautiful place and angry at the people who did it. But on the other hand, I see them as my neighbours and friends and know how they are suffering. Farmers were led astray by governments, by universities, by people who just wanted to make a buck. Agribusiness. Some of the farmers wanted to be rich, but mostly the real rural people have stuck it out for generations because they wanted to live close to nature, even if they don't know that themselves. What they dread leaving is not so much the big business or the big machinery, but getting up in the morning to the peace and beauty of the countryside, or going to bed at night listening to the coyotes howl, and seeing the swans come back every spring.*

**BiC:** *The Fourth Archangel is set in the year 2000, and the farm crisis has only gotten worse. Will the Palliser Triangle ever return to its original state?*

**Butala:** I'm sure that there will be abandoned farms, but they'll go to weeds, not short-grass prairie. Even if we don't have drought, we won't be able to sell our wheat, so people will go broke and have to leave. Down in the driest part of the Palliser Triangle, I think it's pretty generally agreed — though it's not said out loud much — that there is only about 20 years of farming left in the soil.

**BiC:** *You are a very traditional writer. Does it bother you, being at one end of a literary spectrum, with someone like Brian Faucett at the other?*

**Butala:** I'm fulfilling my childhood dream, and that's to be like the writers that went before me.

**BiC:** *And Alice Munro is your living hero.*

**Butala:** Oh, I think she is the Canadian genius. I try to do the same things that she does, but then she takes off into outer space and I can't follow. It just makes my heart sink. But as for the postmodernism thing, I see that as a kind of playing games. A game played by brilliant people trying to outdo each other. It's entertaining, it's sometimes charming, but in the end it's pretty silly. And it's destructive, many of the writers who do it are tremendously talented people, and it seems to me they are not taking their own gifts seriously. I believe in humanity and I believe that what we do has to mean something. You can only say what the postmodernists have to say once, and then why bother. And if you take it to its ultimate expression, then you've got to quit writing. Critics are not artists and they never will be. And they should stop trying to be artists.

**BiC:** *Do you object to being called a realist?*

**Butala:** I object to it because it's a put-down. It's saying, we don't have to think about her work because she's just another prairie realist and that's all been done, and what she does doesn't count. I wish I could defend myself better. I know what Ken Mitchell says about the death of the novel. *But the novel isn't dead. I personally know hundreds of people who are still reading them and can't wait for the next one.* ◊

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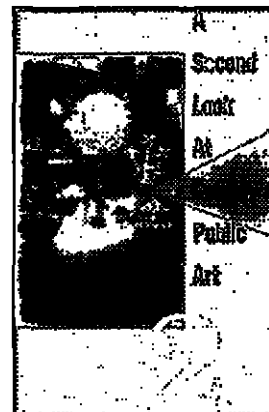
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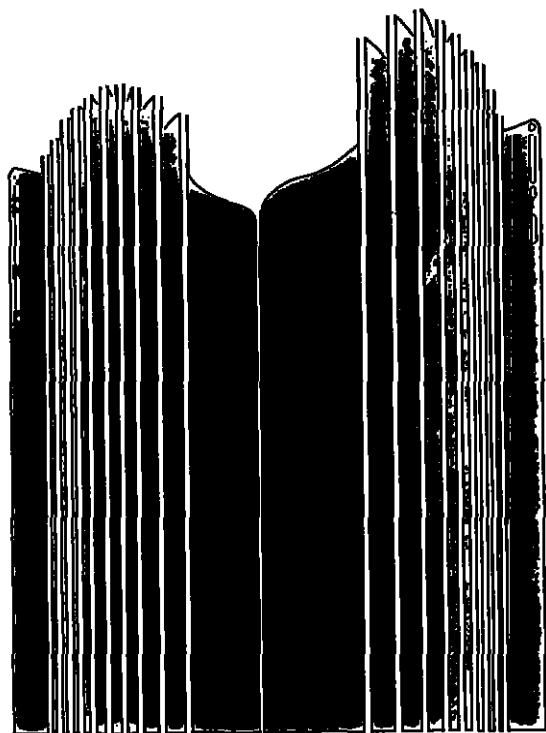
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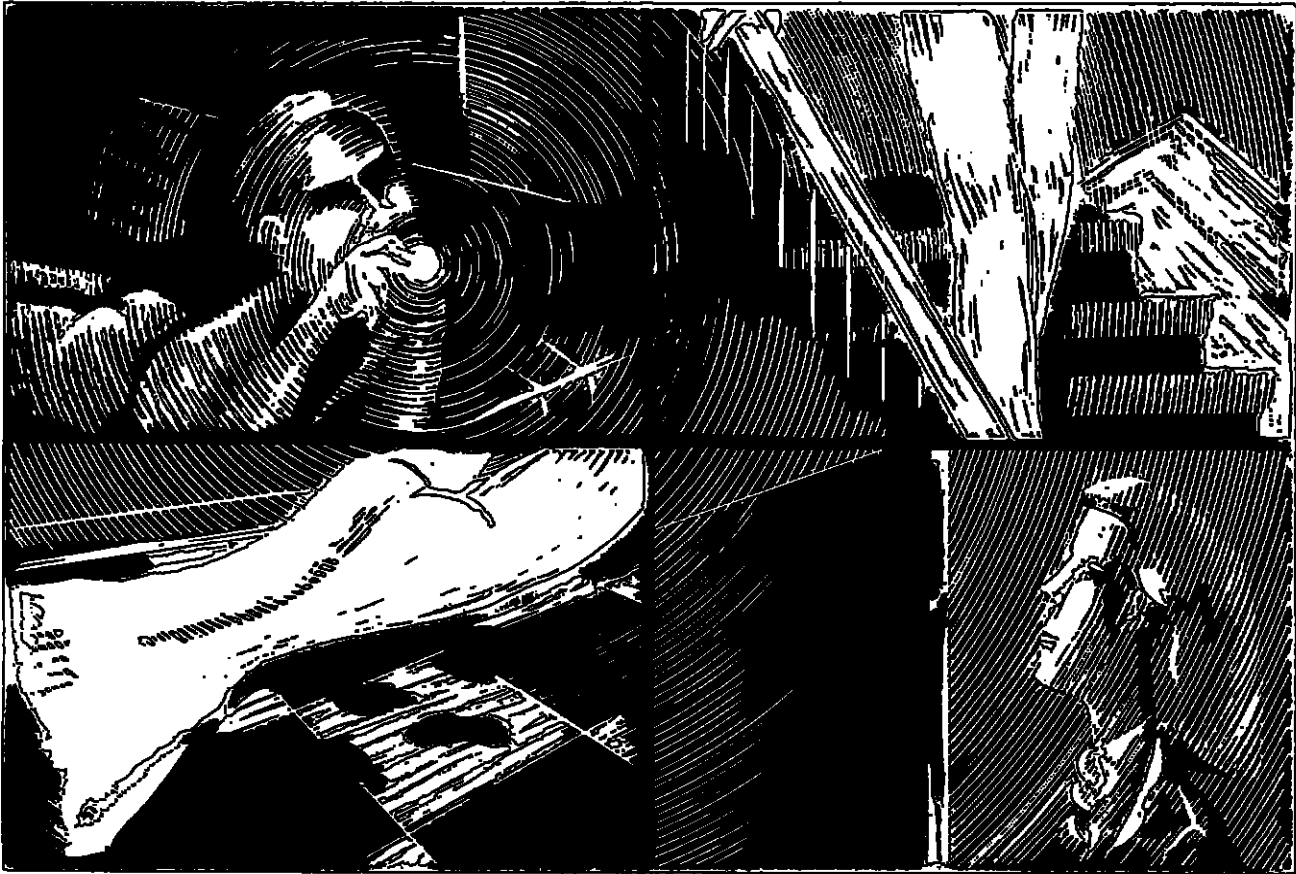
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# Sam and Angie

*The night Sam and Angela celebrated their 15th wedding anniversary, the river was veiled by shrubbery, and the world was a glass bubble you could tip over*

by MARGARET SWEATMAN



## DANCING IN THE DARK

ON THAT JUNE night the rain finally broke the drought, Sam's house was devoted to homesick violins and a gospel choir. Rain blended magically with percussive horns, the slide and shine of the snare, the warm waltz rhythms of a double bass, and the smooth-throated longing, hoarse at its edges, the prolonged velars of Ray Charles.

Glistening sheets of warm rain, the green night silvered by ribbons of rain down Wind Boulevard, the first summer shower strung upon the radial sound-box of polished wood, the downpour a glissando over the sound-post of steel, a spiral staircase descending from the bedroom loft to the open fireplace. Immense glazed windows looked out on the hedge that disguised the dike upon which Sam's house was built. In the winter, you could see the river through the willows. But the night Sam and Angela celebrated their 15th wedding anniversary, the river was veiled by shrubbery, and the world was a

glass bubble you could tip over and stars would tumble and Ray Charles and a bit of champagne and Sam's white tuxedo and Angela's pearl-sequined dress and the shiver of rain across the tiles spilled splinters of pleasure over Angela's shoulders while they danced.

Angela leaned into Sam's throat to feel the vibrations of his voice. *They saay, Ruby you're like a dreamme*, sang Ray Charles, and Sam said, *they say, like a dream. They saay, Ruby you're like a songge, You just don't know right from*

*...perhaps a piece of glass had cut her when she ran her hands over the floor seeking the candle, a match. She lit many candles all over the house, crying loudly, a bleating, an animal noise*

*wrongge. And Sam said, right from wrong, heartaches for me.*

They were home from an extravagantly dull party. Angela had soaked her hands with the broth that ran from the pink shells of boiled shrimp. Her tongue, she could feel it, white with the salt of caviar. And tortes, and those little meringues, blue cheese with grapes and the last sweet wine.

Sam smoothed Angela's sequined dress up, up over her wide hips, he cupped her breasts in each hand, Angela's breasts larger than his hand, he slipped the straps over her shoulders and slid the zipper down to the dimpled place in her broad back. With a certain force Sam pulled the dress over her breasts and her white soft belly to the red hair on pudenda on thighs to her feet which were bare when they danced. The skin, moist with summer heat, freckled on her chest and her round forearms. When she was naked Sam broke the waltz and he held Angela close, and he was only slightly taller but more in his black shoes and more by holding her tightly between his legs, Angela with her dimpled knees bending between Sam's long lean legs, and he looked down into her eyes, and taking a handful of Angela's red hair he pulled her head back and took her throat between his teeth and then he said, "How about something to eat, Angel." As Ray Charles and his strings, his piano, his horns, his bass, his subtle harp diminished, as the gospel choir shifted from major to minor, *She's but a dream*, as Sam with a knowing look released Angela to go up to his room, he told her, "I'm getting out of this monkey suit," climbing the spindled stairs. She stood naked, her white dress in her hands, her red hair fallen, in the quiver of light from melting candles on a glass table, in a trance from which Sam woke her when he leaned over the railing to say, "Angie. Food. Before I die."

## PATRICK

HE HAD EXAGGERATED poise. His father had left him with little, other than elaborately graceful mannerisms and a rapacious sense of self-importance. He knew that. He modulated the physical expressions and cultivated the psychological. He had dexterity.

He entered the interview room like Fred Astaire on his way to meet Cyd Charisse. He swung his arms in careful semi-circles, toes pointed out strolling and softly, he whistled under his breath. He pulled his pant legs up a little above the knees and was seated, his hands folded before him on the table, when Angela arrived.

She was no lawyer, that much was obvious. There was much that was obvious about Angela. Judging from the size of her, she would be a woman who likes ice

cream. When Patrick greeted Angela he was thinking about pistachio, about cherry burgundy. When he rose to offer her his slender hand (she enveloped Patrick's hand, a sculptor greeting a young pianist) he was remembering Italian ice. He studied Angela's pimento-coloured hair (it was the fluorescent light, suppressed the rawny) and he recalled the old woman who sold him *gelati*, her sleek black hair, her diamond-shaped face when she smiled and stood on her toes to reach over the glass counter.

Angela threw her briefcase on the table and removed her suit jacket. "Whew! Aren't you dying?" She wore a sleeveless white shirt, it revealed her arms, round and freckled. Patrick followed the freckles on Angela's arms like a traveller in a field of poppies, his eyes suddenly aching to sleep, the dream of the ice-cream woman threatening to overwhelm him. He focused on her eyes, green. For no particular reason, Patrick choked, a spitting choke that stung his throat.

"Are you OK?" she asked.

"Sure. I'm fine."

"That's really weird," she said quietly.

"What's that? Pardon me?"

"Oh, nothing, it's just," she waved her marble arms, "I wonder if I make people allergic. I mean, my husband sneezes all the time."

Again, Patrick fought to keep his eyes from rolling back in his head. To sleep, to sleep. She was nodding at the cop in the observation window. "They treating you OK?"

"I guess so."

"Have you made a statement?" When she looked worried, she made little reindeer antlers between her eyes.

"I don't know. I guess so. I told them what happened sort of. They caught me red-handed." He laughed, and his laughter was charming, boyish and affable. "I've always wanted to say that. Red-handed."

"How old are you, Patrick?"

"Twenty-three."

"Why were you in her house?"

"I don't know."

She looked baffled, blew out a breath. Patrick nodded slightly, identifying the smell of maraschino. "How could you not, like, know?" she asked.

"Well, I walked in the front door, if that's what you mean. It was open." When Angela appeared to be disappointed, Patrick looked for something to give her. He said patiently, as if he were much older than she was, "You're wondering whether there was forethought. There wasn't."

"Are you a student?"

"Self-taught." The smile.

"Did you know the woman?"

"Not really. I'd seen her."

"Seen her? You watched her?"

"Yeah. Sort of. I'm not a pervert, Ms. Whetherly. I'd go down the back lane to get to the bus stop and she'd be in her garden. She planted a lot of flowers back there. It was really beautiful."

"Patrick, did you go to her house to steal?"

"No, no. I didn't need anything. The cops think I was there to steal. They have no imagination."

"Well, it's tough when you were going through her things like that."

"I was just looking."

"Did you know she was home?"

He was suddenly looking at the palms of his hands, reading the lines. "I did and I didn't." He drew this for her, turning his hands over, *comme ci comme ça*. "If I'd known she was home, I would've had to have a plan, you see? And I know I didn't have one, a plan. I just went in."

Angela was listening and watching him, interested, so he continued.

"I remember I was walking by, and I looked in through the front window. It was hot and sunny so it was hard to see much because of the trees on the window."

"Pardon me?"

"Like the trees on the window."

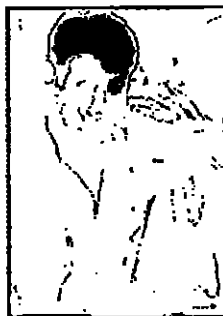
"Oh. The reflection."

Patrick didn't seem to hear.

"She had one of those black gates, it was open and her front door was open too. So I just turned at her sidewalk and went into the house. It was a lot cooler in there. She has a problem, I'll tell you, I wouldn't want her for a mother."

"Her for a mother?"

"The place was a mess. There were clothes all over the place. Hanging on the doors, and in the dining-room area, you know, where a family would sit down and eat." Patrick showed Angela how the family would sit, drawing boxes with his hands. "Shiny silver material. On the table, you see. I remember thinking that she must be making a Halloween costume, a robot costume or a ballerina if it was for a little girl. Why she would be making a Halloween costume in June is anybody's guess. There was a sewing machine right there where the family would eat. She was sewing something. Obviously."



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"Patrick, what did you do when she found you?"

"Well, she came downstairs. It was actually all right at first. I heard her." He looked up at the ceiling, which was Plexiglas. His shoulders tipped right and left, Angela watched his small muscled shoulders move beneath his cotton shirt, the sleeve so carefully ironed. His right hand pointed up. "She came walking down the stairs, getting bigger all the time."

"She came into view."

"Her foot and then her knees and then her whole leg." Patrick smiled pleasantly. "The whole shebang."

"Was she frightened?"

"Her eyes were open very wide. Oh, and I remember her throat made a sound. You know the noise a cat makes before it's going to be sick?"



ANGELA WILL DIE of embarrassment. I've never known anyone with less confidence.

I'm the only one who knows this about her.

He was lying in the dark. Sam was. Angela would see him by the light of his cigarette when she unlocked the front door. The thick wedge from the streetlight showed her as a blue improbable figure, her briefcase under her arm, its brass fittings cutting

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her wrist. She nearly dropped it in the tiled vestibule, and Sam pictured the cracked tile and heard the dry clicking sounds of her entry and saw her shadow misshapen by the end of the tile and the beginning of the thick rug, felt her invade the house, corrosive, wind on blue veins in marble.

She was looking up to the bedroom loft, looking right at him. Sam dragged on his cigarette so she could make out his face.

"Sam?"

"Yes, honey."

"Why aren't there any lights on?"

"Did you get him off?"

"Who?"

"That good-looking young man. Did you get him off?"

"Yeah. I won. What's the matter with the lights in this place?" Angela was trying the switch by the open front door.

"The power is off."

Angela looked out to the street. "But it's not out anywhere else."

"Just at our house I guess, Angel. Why don't you come here."

Angela closed the door. She stood still, thrusting her eyes into the dark. She put her hand to her eyes like someone squinting into the sun. Sam laughed. "What are you doing, darling?"

She laughed too, baffled. "How can you see anything? Why didn't you light a candle?"

"I thought you'd like it. Don't you find it romantic?"

"Bloody weird," she said so quietly Sam wondered if he was

meant to hear.

"What's that?" He was polite.

"Nothing. I can't see, that's all." Angela sighed. "I'm tired, Sam. Do we have to play games tonight?"

Sam was suddenly running downstairs. Angela said, "It's all right, Sam, I can find a flashlight." But Sam was in the kitchen rummaging through a drawer. "Got it." The beam blinded Angela, and once again, Sam's location was the only thing she knew in the dark. "Turn it off, Sam. Please." She walked blindly toward him. She tripped over the edge of something sharp, it cut her shin. Angela touched the cut. "Please, honey. Here, look, I'll find the candles."

Then, abruptly, it was entirely dark. Angela stood still. The streetlight through the window revealed its ashen light. The absence of walls, the sporadic arrangement of furniture in the vaulted house, Angela laughing nervously. "Watch your step," said Sam.

With her arms waving, Angela felt her way to an Oriental table. She opened its drawer too fast and it fell at her feet. The sound of her cherished objects rolling, the sound of heavy silver, gold rings, and a crystal globe with the stars cut into it, rolling and breaking, fine splinters of crystal at Angela's feet.

She was crying then, perhaps a piece of glass had cut her when she ran her hands over the floor seeking the candle, a match. She lit many candles all over the house, crying loudly, a bleating, an animal noise. She cupped the flame with her cut hand, stepped over the fractured glass to the liquor cabinet, poured a brandy, hesitated, poured one for Sam. At the end of the horseshoe couch, Angela dropped off her shoes and curled up, holding her drink in her lap. She cried loudly, in the intimacy of a marriage, to lose face, to crumple, to be impersonal.

Sam helped her bandage her hand. He removed her stained suit jacket. He reached under and pulled her stockings over the cut on her leg. He covered her with a cotton sheet from the bed. All the white candles were burning. Angela had drunk a lot of brandy, and she dozed with the thick contentment that comes after such weeping.

"And now, Angel, tell me about your day."

"Today? You were there. That was nice of you to come over, Sam." She was watching the uneven flames, many liquid flames on the shining table. "Why did you?" she asked then.

"I like to watch you, babe. At work."

"I didn't know you were there."

"You don't always know where I am, do you?"

She looked at him then. Her face was swollen and moist, her impossible hair orange in the strange light. "Is that the first time you've done that?" she asked.

"Done what, Angel?"

"Watched me. When I didn't know you were there."

"Does a tree fall in the forest? You're tired."

"It's nice of you to come and see me in court, Sam. Only I'd rather know if you're there."

Sam kissed her and covered her pale shoulder with the sheet. "Next time. I'll be the one with the hard on in the last row."

Angela laughed and she fitted herself against him.

"But you still haven't told me," said Sam.  
 She turned and studied his face. "Told you what, Sam?"  
 "Did you — get him — off?"  
 "Patrick?"  
 "Oh! His name is Patrick, is it? Is it Pat or Patrick?"  
 "Yeah. I did tell you, Sam. I said it when I first came home."  
 "Oh yes, I forgot. Well. Tell me all."  
 "It wasn't a big deal. He got a suspended sentence. Poor kid needs some help."  
 "He's hardly a kid. He's a grown man. And he's very nice looking."  
 "I didn't really notice. He's a smart kid, though. Rouzen life."  
 "He noticed you."  
 She laughed, pleased. "Go on."  
 "He did," Sam said. "I saw him. I've got eyes, I have."



**T**HE FOOT RESTS on the top stair, its shape is visible through the thin shoes, which are damp from rain. Most of the weight rests on the left foot so that the body leans to the left, which explains the necessity of the hand, its palm flat against the diminutive yellow roses in the wallpaper. Only recently have the knuckles conformed over youthful cartilage to resemble a man's hand. It is dirty, and the marks it makes as it moves down the stairs would be simply a handprint, a shadow on the yellow wall.

The blue carpet runs everywhere, into the bedroom. The bottom corner of the disheveled bed is in a room lit by flickering veins of light from the screen. There would be the rasp of a television. The bed is empty. The open closet door reveals many dresses, printed dresses, and silk blouses that fall from the hanger, rows of her shoes carefully arranged, high heels, running shoes, slippers, and from a hook on the door her nightgown, a blue robe with a painted butterfly. The vanity is yellowed and if you cleaned it, the cloth would show the ochre stain of nicotine. In its drawers there are slips and lace camisoles, a quilted silk bag containing stockings, bras, white, red, black, elastic bands for her breasts. There are several pairs of panties with a narrow crotch that would fit small and high, they would rub her, maybe cut inside her a little, she would feel that.

In the second drawer, the one that holds her sweaters neatly folded, a lacquered box with mother-of-pearl, and when you open it there are the last tin-xylophone notes of a song you would remember. The box when it's held to the light is full of jewellery. Loosely the fingers admire a ruby brooch with diamonds, or cut-glass, and a string of jet.

Remember the car that passes. Its wheels rip open the rain-water at the side of the narrow road. The hand paints fresh patterns on the faded paper. She is in the bathroom, under the

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sink beside the toilet. One hand clutches the drain pipe, close to the rag and cleanser. The other hand is hidden beneath her, it would be between her thighs. She lies on her stomach, her face turned to the bathroom wall where the sink and toilet leak from under the seals and caulking. Her back and buttocks are white as thin milk. You see the small undulations of her ribs. The blood blooms like a riotous garden, bigger than roses would grow here, hot and exotic fists of blood. You must remember everything. The wrinkles in the rubber plug hung from a chain. The bath-mat was beige, sown with her wounds.

Downstairs, there is more light. Stairways are regular and easily memorized. In her desk a silver letter-opener, a wooden box with stamps and a pearl earring, the letters she kept, their voices dried, twig-letters scrawled. Drapes hanging near the couch nearly hide the photograph. There is always an old photograph. They love themselves that way, over the years and generations. It is the same with the ornate gold-framed mirror above the false fireplace. Beside the fireplace, a bookcase with glass doors that opens with a skeleton key. The tidy kitchen table is burdened with a typewriter, files, on a crocheted cloth. Old linen in the chest under the window, and a box with velvet lining containing bone-handled knives. The hands learn every fold. The windows with half-curtains, lace, from brass rods.

But then he is at the door.

And there is nothing to keep you but memory. ♦

*This is an excerpt from a novel in progress by Margaret Sweatman.*

# Of Mirth and Men

*When you're writing humour, says Fred Stenson, you can rarely go wrong with the misfit*

by  
KENNETH  
McGOOGAN

NOT SO LONG ago, while participating in a "reading cabaret" sponsored by the Writers' Guild of Alberta, Fred Stenson was driven, if not to revise, at least to qualify his views on humorous fiction. Having entertained a Sunday afternoon audience with a funny hockey story, part of an unpublished collection, the Calgary author found himself listening to another writer's tall tale about a 300-pound North American Native who gets the best of a couple of white men — but only after becoming the worst kind of stereotype.

Judging from the laughter, most of the audience of about 90 enjoyed the yarn. But Stenson — who lives with a Métis woman — found himself squirming. A couple of years before, while roughing out a workshop presentation, he'd responded to his own rhetorical question about why humorous fiction is so hard to market: "I fear it's because we have become so serious about everything. In our efforts to protect every sex, race, religion, minority, and beast on the face of the earth, we have unfortunately limited what can be made fun of to zero."

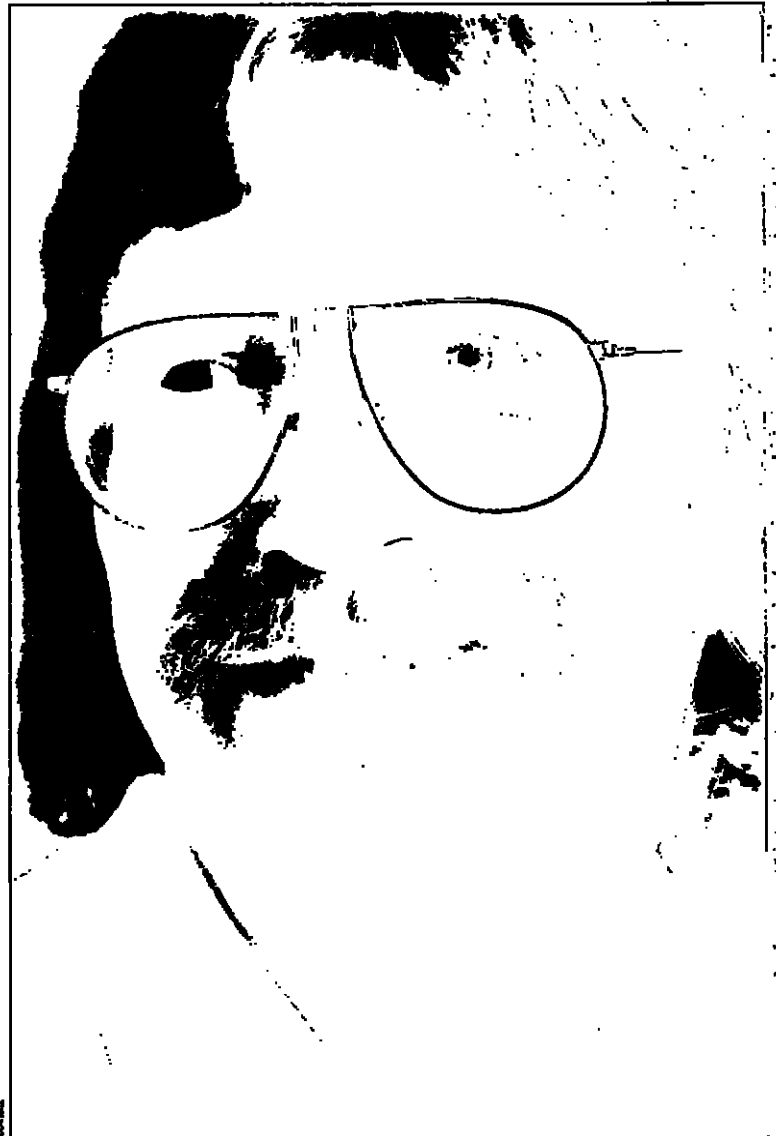
But sitting at his paper-strewn kitchen table recently, drinking decaffeinated coffee, Stenson shook his head over what he'd heard at the cabaret: "It reminded me that there really is a burden on humour as far as political correctness goes," he told me. "I mean, this guy honestly doesn't understand why people would be upset at what he's saying. Yet he'd never create a 300-pound Black man, name him Snowball, and give him a step-and-fetch-it accent. Maybe these battles have to be won culture by culture. What you can't make fun of, it seems to me, is an oppressed people."

Stenson, whose most recent book is a 1990 collection of amusing stories called *Working Without a Laugh Track* (Coteau),

has thought a lot about humour. His two published novels, *Lonesome Hero* (Macmillan, 1974) and *Last One Home* (NeWest, 1988), are laced with it — especially the former, which won a silver medal from the Canadian Authors Association. And one of his two non-fiction books, an official history of the Canadian gas-processing industry called *Waste to Wealth*, prompted a reviewer to observe that "the breezy, detached tone of the dust-jacket blurb is kept up inside the book."

That blurb noted that "Calgary-based Fred Stenson was born a few hundred yards downwind of the B. A. Pincher Creek gas processing plant in southern Alberta," the site of a longstanding controversy over emissions. "Nonetheless, he was able to complete a bachelor's degree in economics at the University of Calgary, and to go on to a career as a professional writer of fiction, non-fiction and film."

Stenson is not only funny, you see. He's also impossible to pigeon-hole — an origi-



Fred Stenson

nal. But let's take it from the top. Stenson was born and raised on a farm roughly 25 kilometres south of Pincher Creek, a town 170 kilometres south of Calgary. He took grades one, two, and three in a one-room schoolhouse, then began riding the bus into town. As a kid he read a lot, but he didn't



discover the world of adult fiction until he was 14: "I was really miffed," he says. "I felt as if a whole world had been deliberately concealed from me — as if this great secret had been kept."

Stenson fled the farm in 1969 to attend the University of Calgary. Halfway through his degree in economics, he considered switching to history or philosophy. "I never intended to be an accountant," he comments. "But then I realized that changing would mean staying another year, and I thought, Forget it! I wanted to go to Europe."

Just before he left, in the fall of 1972, Stenson spotted an advertisement for the first Search-For-A-New-Alberta-Novelist competition. During the next several months, while travelling around England, Ireland, Holland, France, and Spain, Stenson wrote a novel in longhand and

competition, and was later published by Macmillan.

"I got a lot of strokes for that book," Stenson says. "The CAA silver medal. An Alberta achievement award. But after that it was tough sledding. I sincerely believed that writing a novel a year would be my life. I had that success so early that it was doubly hard to learn the craft. Something perverse in me kept insisting that I already knew the craft."

In an earlier interview, Stenson told me that "The raw truth is that (with *Lonesome Hero*) I'd said just about everything I had to say at that point — and then some." Still, the mid-'70s brought their victories. For three consecutive years, Stenson was runner-up in the *Miss Chatelaine* short-fiction contest. He laughs about it now: "I never won it!"

In 1975, Stenson's father died and Fred ran the family farm for a year. This return, transformed, figures plainly in his second novel, *Last One Home*. The book focuses on a young Métis named Gabriel, a would-be engineer who returns to the family farm from Calgary after his father suffers a heart attack. Soon he finds himself dealing not only with an ex-lover and an old friend who has become an enemy, but with mixed feelings about his father and his heritage.

Shortly after the novel appeared, Stenson told me that it had three main sources. Years before, he'd attempted a novel about a father-son feud — "and that idea stayed with me." Second, having grown up on a farm, he'd long been interested in "the demographics of farm families." Finally, a close Métis friend from Pincher Creek was "completely indifferent" to his ancestral heritage — and Stenson found this fascinating.

The novel's highlights include a madcap

trip to Batoche (famous since the Riel Rebellion), vivid evocations of the landscape of southern Alberta, and an almost mythical finale in which Gabriel tacitly acknowledges the importance of his heritage.

Meanwhile, back in 1976, Stenson left the farm and spent three months in Mexico. When he returned to Alberta, he landed a job with a small film company in Banff: "I got a couple of documentary-film credits and that opened the door to other freelancing."

Stenson now has roughly 100 credits in what he calls "the great invisible world" of documentary films and videos. "Industrials, educationals, children's drama — you name it." His titles include *Working Cowboy: In Search of a Cowboy Song with Ian Tyson*, *Landscapes* (seven half-hour films on Alberta), and *Criminal Justice* (two half-hour videos on the Canadian criminal-justice system). His work has won awards from the Alberta Motion Picture Industry and at the Yorkton Film Festival.

Video work and non-fiction — his other book is a guide titled *Rocky Mountain House* — have kept bread on the table while, in sundry magazines, Stenson has published about two dozen short stories, several of which have been anthologized. In 1980, his story "Arlene," which appeared in *Saturday Night*, won him a national Author's Award for best magazine short fiction.

Four years later, Stenson was one of three Alberta writers featured in the anthology *Three Times Five* (NeWest). A *Calgary Herald* review remarked on his anecdotal style, and on the way he framed stories in a casual, conversational fashion. It also drew attention to Stenson's fast wit, his ear for repartee, and his eye for cultural foible.

These gifts are much in evidence in Stenson's latest book, *Working Without a Laugh Track*. It's a collection of stories about contemporary men facing new challenges — infertility clinics? pre-natal classes? — with frequently hilarious results.

Originally, Stenson planned to write a series of stories based on people's occupations. But he wrote one about an obstetrician "and that opened the door into this whole other cycle." Here we find stories about "tame men" having newly common experiences like taking care of a baby.

## Under the Knife

Elmo was a pig upon them, with this wife who had created him, the salt of the land, still recovering from the flourish of the new oil boom. Elmo had to admit that he was contemplating the same old band. There was another item, by the way, on the list. Due to his direction, and this one had nothing to do with the selling of vulval-looking flowers in his backyard. It had to do with vasectomy. Elmo and his wife had agreed that he would have one. Two children, much as they were loved, were enough. Elmo's surgery date had been booked, neatly, one week into May. His six-week living prohibition was up. He had already signed the consent form, opting for local anaesthetic in the groin. But he could get a column or two out of what happened. The word felt as a story meant a slight extension of the bonding between Elmo and the couch. Despite what his doctor said and what several medical advice columnists had written, Elmo believed he would be impotent after his vasectomy. At the moment the scalpel sliced into the accented folds of his scrotum, his bonding days were done. This was a very, very, and powerful force urging Elmo toward what he had long known as *The Last Book*. He only hoped that it would not be the book that was heard around the world.

From "The Bonding Ban," in *Working without a Laugh Track* (Coteau)

mailed it home to be typed and submitted. *Lonesome Hero*, whose central character, Tyrone Lock, is touted as "Holden Caulfield down on the farm," was a finalist in the

"A lot of these situations have been dealt with by women," Stenson told me, "but from a male point of view, they haven't been dealt with at all." Not if you don't count movies such as *Three Men and a Baby*, which Stenson calls "trivial — a series of obvious jokes."

So: is this book anti-feminist? Stenson reacts strongly. "It certainly isn't that. All the male figures are people who went along with the changes of the past couple of decades, and who accepted the fairness and rightness of feminist arguments." They have discovered, however, that theoretical and moral arguments are one thing, and changing the way they live another: "There are all kinds of lingering patterns that never go away."

Some men felt angry all through the feminist '80s, Stenson says, "but I never did. I thought, Women's time has arrived and good for them. There was also a sense that the male sex was in retreat, that we weren't very important in the scheme of things. But we're half the human race, and this can't last. We're going to see a resurgence of male writing. I see the potential for a literature that is beyond confrontation."

That said, Stenson does draw a rough distinction between male and female humour. The former, he says, is often risqué and sexually based, and usually focuses on a male cutting loose from society to live dangerously, irresponsibly, outside the conventions. He cites the fiction of J. P. Donleavy, one of his all-time favourite writers.

Female humour, on the other hand, is "more psychological, more subtle" — and here he mentions Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and the work of Ethel Wilson: a female character finds herself mired in convention, and humour arises out of humiliating or embarrassing circumstances. The heroine is often the ineffectual victim of bigger and brassier people, Stenson says, "but there's this great sarcasm happening in the mind."

This distinction notwithstanding, Stephen Leacock "had a female sense of humour," Stenson observes, while the humour of W. O. Mitchell — another profound influence — is decidedly male. Stenson situates himself squarely in the female camp. The stories in *Working Without a Laugh Track* treat "men living blithely within convention," he says.

"They have jobs, wives, and kids, and they spend their weekends taking care of the yard. Then, something happens to throw them into the position of the outsider."

In "Bill's Sperm Count," the protagonist discovers that he's incapable of giving a sperm sample at a doctor's office. In "Blueballs the Pirate" a man named Jim, who has had a vasectomy, is so shocked by the painful consequences that he is transformed into his *alter ego* Jack, an implacable enemy of his own conventional suburban life.

Stenson himself said goodbye to suburbia in 1989, after splitting with his wife of 10 years: "We had a divergence — a colossal divergence." Now divorced, Stenson lives in a top-floor flat in a funky Calgary neighbourhood that boasts more than its share of writers. On Wednesday evenings they often gather at a nearby bar.

Stenson appears to be endlessly prolific. He recently completed a collection of humorous stories that focus on an eccentric hockey player named Doug Burns. The first of these, "Teeth," he wrote in the early '80s. Since then, it has appeared in five different publications: "It's easily the most popular thing I ever wrote."

Stenson wrote a second Doug Burns story, and it was snapped up for an anthology, and then a third (which elicited a signed rejection from a senior editor at the *Atlantic* asking to see more). "I wrote the rest of the stories at speed last fall — writing at just an absurd clip."

The hockey player Doug Burns is an example of what Stenson calls "the misfit." When you're writing humour, he says, "you can rarely go wrong with the misfit — someone ill-suited to the life situation he or she is in." With Burns, "I took all the standards by which hockey players are praised, and I invented a character in whom all of these traits were inverted.

"So, hockey players are what? Tough, hard-working, selfless team-players, winning means everything to them, they love hockey fans for whom they see themselves as working, they're not afraid of a fight, they come to the defence of smaller players on the team, they love hockey more than life.

"So whom did I create? Burns is a talented hockey player, a high draft-pick, and the highest-scoring forward on a terrible team. He hates hockey but likes money.

The title 'Teeth' comes from Burns's main difference from the other players. He still has all his teeth. It has to mean that Burns stays away from everything that is rough and tumble about hockey, which is practically everything about the game."

The stories in *Working Without a Laugh Track*, Stenson says, "are just another way of playing with this idea of the misfit. You start out with a character who is conventional in every way — a comfortable insider. Then you create a situation that violently thrusts this person from the inside to the outside. Suddenly the world explodes. Part of what will be funny is that the character has no skills whatsoever for dealing with the problem of suddenly being a misfit."

Stenson recently completed a three-month stint as writer-in-residence at Calgary's Mount Royal College. He has also just finished editing a book called *A Place of Many Voices*, which celebrates the ethnic diversity of Alberta. "This is still viewed as a white European province," Stenson notes. "The fact is, since the early 1970s, most immigrants have come from Asia, Africa, and South America. I wanted to make the diversity of the population evident."

Stenson has yet another novel making the rounds, "a pretty experimental piece" about three writers, two men and a woman, that is set in Calgary and takes place in a single day. And he has been working sporadically on yet another book, a historical novel set in the 1840s and focusing on the fur trade: "It's very big, very difficult. I don't expect it to be the next thing I finish."

Chances are, that next thing will be humorous. "Lately, I've been taking humour more seriously," Stenson says. "I've rediscovered the power of it. People have trouble seeing the funny side. But if you take the awful things that happen to you and show they can be looked at humorously — that takes a lot of weight off people.

"I've also come to the conclusion, after a long, long period, that humour is probably what I do best. It's probably the one area in which I can claim a certain uniqueness. My serious fiction has been okay. But I don't think it can lay quite the same claim to being unique. I'm not giving up on the serious stuff. But I find it more difficult to do. Humour comes easily to me." ♦

# Leave Language Alone!

*If those who want to impose political correctness on English don't watch out, they'll be stereotyped as 'intellectually challenged'*

by WAYNE JONES

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS is to language what excessive table manners are to eating. A bit of common-sense regulation is necessary so that both the food and the company are enjoyed to the fullest. If someone is always reaching across your plate in order to get the salt, or if someone else insists on wiping his hands on his pant legs, then it is unlikely anyone is going to have a good dinner. On the other hand, if your mistaken choice of fork for the salad is met with snobbish sideways glances, or if the conversation is civil but unbearably insipid — "I really do sense a movement *away* from polyester" — well, you will certainly be more imaginatively thorough with your excuses the next time you are invited.

The same applies to the speaking and writing of language. There are, of course, the most basic of conventions, such as how words are spelled or pronounced, and the fact that certain meanings and usages are generally attributed to certain words. Political correctness in language, however, is an attempt to go beyond these basics. It is forcible over-regulation aimed at making the language conform to social ideals.

The two most interesting things about political correctness are its forcibleness and its superficiality. One of the few solid truths about language is that it changes over time. New words are introduced and accepted, old distinctions of meaning are eliminated, usages become obsolete. All this occurs as human reality changes: language follows along. Political correctness is partially an attempt to reverse the process, to change the language first in the vain hope that this will somehow contribute to the march of social progress. For example, those who espouse political correctness presume that discriminatory attitudes toward people with AIDS might be discouraged by using language that de-emphasizes their differences from people without AIDS. Thus, the correct term has become not *AIDS patients* but rather *persons living with AIDS*. The idea is that the latter term asserts that the person involved is a *person* first, not a victim, not a patient, not someone *with* a disease, but rather a person (almost incidentally) *living with* a disease. This simplistic translation of a social ideal into a contrived polysyllabic description is typical of political correctness.

I am certainly not saying that the ideal is unworthy. What is objectionable is the attempt to work toward that ideal by forcing language into artificial terminology, which is thought to be as pro-

gressive as people should be in reality. The effort is bound to fail, however, because language tends to follow instead of lead. It can never be forced to be any more enlightened than its speakers are.

The political correction of English tends to produce terms that are cumbersome and far removed from normal usage, terms that are ridiculously vague and inappropriate, terms that seem like self-parodies. I am not sure any more whether *vertically challenged* is meant to be a serious alternative for *short*, or whether it is something devised by people trying to satirize the whole process. In any case, this example illustrates the typical dynamic: the goal is to eliminate discrimination; the result is language that is euphemistic and condescending. The idea behind designating someone as *[adverb] challenged* is to produce an image of that person as forging through jungles of misunderstanding and prejudice, overcoming all obstacles in his or her path, and, finally, ending up being not quite equal to us unchallenged folk but having spunk, dammit.

Now, *that* is offensive.

The other interesting thing about political correctness is its superficiality. In this regard it seems to be typical of the surface-oriented time and culture we live in. Models on TV and in magazines, both men and women, with faces and physiques of jaw-slackening beauty, are set like gods before the rest of us who are more mundanely endowed. I have seen pictures of men's bodies in magazine advertisements that have nearly made me weep as I compared them to my own. Do the models know anything beyond hair, skin, and muscle care? It doesn't matter; appearance is all.

It is in this sort of world that political correctness exists. It is a careful, conservative world in which simplistic, meaningless jargon is offered as a partial solution to the very real problems of discrimination. Women, people with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities — all continue to live without equality, but the correctors imagine that society's attitudes can change, that action can be initiated by simply referring to them in a different way. The idea is that at least we all *seem* to be liberated and non-sexist and unbiased.

What is the solution then? Leave language alone. It cannot be changed at will and it is not the problem, anyway. Discrimination may be eliminated some day, and only then will we have the correct words necessary to talk to each other. ♦

# In Search of an Intertext

*There's a refreshing absence of fiery polemics in the feminism of the 1990s*

by ANN DIAMOND

IGNORANCE is bliss, then Hell is consciousness. Or, in case you hadn't noticed, the world is a dolled-up slaughterhouse where the strong routinely trample and crush the weak, and then justify their domination with all kinds of pious lies and outright threats.

The I Ching has an ideogram for those rare, exceptional circumstances in which the dispossessed actually get a chance to talk back. It's called "treading on the tail of the tiger." We are living in such a period, and there's no telling how long it will last, simply because it's so rare and exceptional.

As recently as the late '50s, it was still possible for many women to live in a second-class state of thoughtless self-surrender, for which they were lauded by everyone from the Pope to Ann Landers. That serviceable ideology took a beating in the late '60s and early '70s with the advent of the women's movement. Those were colourful, messianic, faction-ridden, and emotionally exhausting days, from which many of us emerged with battle fatigue and a profound fear of meetings. And yet I wouldn't have traded the experience for all the diapers in suburbia.

As our generation surveys its scars, it's gratifying to think that for the first time since written records were kept, relatively large groups of women have the tools to become conscious makers of culture — and therefore, of history. It remains to be seen whether the creative efforts of women will now be allowed to take root in human society, or be wiped away by one or a combination of the many hostile counter-trends and movements that are currently flourishing.

Perhaps this uncertainty partly explains why I had both a splitting headache and a great sense of hope and optimism when I finished reading several new books by and about women.

Why headache? Well, feminist theory can be as chafing and uncomfortable as a crinoline. Why optimism? Because of a refreshing absence of the fiery polemics that we devoured in the



'70s. In their place are more and varied voices, and a comparative approach that borrows from a range of different "feminisms."

Two of the books considered here were published by university presses, as the offshoot of conferences. There's a tendency for these texts to interrelate, though not in the sense of simple overlapping or narrow orthodoxy. Recurring themes reflect the vagaries of the *Zeitgeist*, but also demonstrate that, in Canada, a community of women academics and writers has developed a common discourse: what Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood calls "the feminist inter-

text." Heterogeneous and flexible, not to mention "eidetic and open-ended," this intertext has acquired considerable coherence and sophistication, qualities that may help it survive the current backlash. There's a confidence, even an elegance, in much of the writing, which suggests two things: the "greening" of the women's movement over the last decade, and society's growing tendency to listen to and support women's writing.

Women are also busy developing new genres. One of these is "life writing," a literary category that includes diaries, journals, notebooks, letters, travel books, epistolary narratives, and autobiography.

In *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice* (University of Toronto Press, 288 pages, \$50 cloth, \$19.95 paper), Marlene Kadar has assembled a thoughtful, engaging, and altogether readable collection of essays that brings feminist and post-modernist theory to bear on the multi-disciplinary theme of life writing, using models from anthropology, history, and literary criticism. Among the works discussed are Gail Scott's novel *Heroine*,

Elly Danica's first-person account of sexual abuse, *Doni*, Margaret Atwood's autobiographical fiction *Cat's Eye*, the journals of Marian Engel and Elizabeth Smart, and *Don Quixote* — by Cervantes, not Kathy Acker.

Kadar has done an unusually fine job of collecting and arranging these essays, which results in a complex, yet focused and extremely accessible anthology. Despite a wealth of concerns and approaches, the various contributions do talk to each other, raising and clarifying concepts and issues, and even generating excitement and discovery. This is feminist criticism at its reader-friendliest, and I hope it inspires more of equal quality.

Another anthology, *The Anatomy of Gender: Women's Struggle for the Body* (Carleton University Press, 250 pages, \$19.95 paper), edited by Dawn H. Currie and Valerie

Raoul, takes a more general subject and uses it as a springboard for a stimulating and diverse collection of essays — proof of the valuable contribution of Women's Studies to our intellectual and cultural life.

Janice Williamson's exploration of the semiotics of the Edmonton Mall is one of the most innovative, playful, and well-argued pieces in the collection. I was also particularly struck by Winnie Tomm's extremely lucid "Knowing Ourselves as Women," which proposes a feminist epistemology that would replace the

patriarchal notion of the "autonomous individual making 'objective' decisions based on 'abstract' judgement." Calling for an alternative model based on reciprocal autonomy and mirroring, she proposes "Aphrodite imagery" as a basis for "new images of Beauty and Wisdom...useful in enabling women to accept their own authority."

Once you get past her introduction, Yvonne Hodkinson's *Female Parts: The Art and Politics of Female Playwrights* (Black Rose, 163 pages, \$15.95 paper) is a readable and engrossing book examining plays by five Canadian women. She does tend to lace her prose with term-paper words like "instrumental" and "concomitant," and stilted academese runs wild in certain sentences, such as: "The utopian vision of the Canadian wilderness grips the female imagination as Merritt links human potential to the inexhaustible landscape."

It's worth pressing on, however, because once she relaxes a bit, Hodkinson is a surprisingly good critic. She brings considerable insight and sensitivity to her analysis of the work of Margaret Hollingsworth, Cindy Cowan, Antonine Maillet, Aviva Ravel, and Betty Jane Wylie. With a finely balanced sense of what moves a play, she unravels the complex relationships and muted epiphanies that underlie much of the writing done by women of this generation.

The book's thesis is an interesting one: that Canadian women playwrights are creating a new dramatic vision based on recurrent themes of wilderness, immigration, and colonialism. Hodkinson analyses the uprooted, disoriented characters in Hollingsworth's *Ever Loving*, about three War brides who move to Lethbridge, Hamilton, and Halifax with their English-Canadian husbands. Since rebellion is unthinkable for these women, Hollingsworth relies heavily on understatement and irony. Hodkinson shows how underneath conventional façades lie broken lives, crushed hopes, and psychological oppression. Self-deception masks a deep sense of cultural emptiness and loss, as too late the women confront a failure they are still afraid to name. Says one of them, of her husband and his bowling league: "It's been an enormously...full life."

Hodkinson deserves praise for her extraordinary sensitivity to cultural and regional differences in analysing five very different plays. She shows how in Aviva Ravel's *The Twisted Loaf*, which is about an elderly Jewish immigrant woman facing death, "wilderness" is transmuted into the bewilderment of trying to fit into a foreign, gentile world. The dying woman's inner struggle leads to delayed recognition that she was meant to be more than just an orthodox, self-sacrificing mother of three daughters. Disappointed by what they've made of themselves in this new world of "limitless opportunity," and distrustful of "too much education" for women, she finally accepts the fact that her youngest daughter will be an artist.

In *Re-Belle et Infidèle/The Body Bilingual* (Women's Press, 176 pages, \$18.95 paper), Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood discusses methods and nuances of feminist translation. This is a playful, challenging book, for which de Lotbinière-Harwood has written two separate, but related, texts, in French and English: perhaps she's a little more playful in English, slightly more challenging in French.

Far from being neutral, translation can be a dangerous activity. Translators have been persecuted, and even burned at the stake



for their efforts. Moreover, to be "bilingual" is to live in two distinct worlds and to be split between the demands of both. All women are essentially bilingual, de Lotbinière-Harwood argues, since they are forced to use the masculine *lingua franca* along with a more esoteric feminine language, which she says is based on "mimicry, intonation, gesture, carriage, and position."

"*Belles infidèles*" was a term applied to 17th-century French translations that were less than accurate but nonetheless served the political imperatives of Louis XIV's court. De Lotbinière-Harwood subverts the phrase in her French title, *Re-Belle et Infidèle*, thus demonstrating the complexity and humour of her own wordplay. She proposes that 20th-century feminist translators make use of "infidelity" to transform the culture of patriarchy.

The book contains some striking facts and translation horror stories: e.g., the butchering of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* by her American translator. De Lotbinière-Harwood describes early attempts at linguistic innovation by women from Hildegard von Bingen in the 12th century to a mid-17th-century French proto-feminist group called *les précieuses*, who invented words describing 40 kinds of smile, 20 kinds of sigh, eight categories of beauty, etc. She also gives examples of translation projects that have required an innovative and/or subversive use of language on her part. De Lotbinière-Harwood's unusual straddling of two languages (she translates in both directions) has made her extra-conscious of the technical problems of "re-writing in the feminine."

At times her point of departure can seem claustrophobic, as when she argues some of the finer points of gender grammar; one can imagine an American feminist being slightly baffled by her detailed prescriptions for dealing with the silent *e* in French (she recommends highlighting it in boldface). De Lotbinière-Harwood's ideas are sometimes those of a radical, inspired technician whose day-to-day struggles revolve around punctuation, sentence structure, and the quest for *le mot juste*. What the book lacks in broad scholarship, it makes up for in verve and imagination. Still, one needs to pinch oneself to remember there are other, less minutely politicized ways of looking at writing.

Finally, for scary late-night reading, I recommend Betty Steele's *Together Again* (Simon & Pierre, 194 pages, \$12.95 paper), whose tone of shrill hyperbole drowns out its supposed concern: the breakdown of family life in North America. This is the kind of book that might have inspired Bluebeard. Its aptly named author, Betty Steele, is a member of Real Women and a frequent lecturer on "feminism and the family." Her smile graces the jacket of this "lively book," which purports to "offer hope," although what it delivers is an irrational, extremist critique of the women's movement.

It's not that Steele, who also wrote *The Feminist Takeover*, hasn't done her research (well, actually, she admits in her dedication that her husband does it for her) — she just marshals any fact she stumbles across to fit her extraordinarily narrow-minded argument that all current social problems are the fault of feminists. There's no mention here of racism, militarism, environmental poisoning, or economic oppression as possible causes of rising violence, widespread mental illness, or the myriad other evils for which Steele holds the women's movement solely responsible.

One gets the feeling that Mr. and Mrs. Steele have combed the local library for abridged gems of 20th-century thought, taking anything that could be twisted out of context to further their diatribe. One minute Steele quotes Jung in defence of "natural instincts," and a few pages later she unknowingly pours scorn on one of his central notions, that of the "feminine" within every man. It's the kind of neo-conservative demagoguery that aims to crush the opposition under a bulldozer of bogus "learning." Behind the relentless quoting of everyone from Freud to Solzhenitsyn stands a prescriptive Revivalism with a punitive agenda.

Ironically, her resolute defence of traditional femininity stands in stark contrast to her own iron-clad rhetoric — which is anything but "eidetic and open-ended." Chapter titles like "Disillusioned Women, Neutered Men," "Rampant, Unjustified Reverse Discrimination," and "The Ugly Face of Androgyny" leave little room for debate and discussion.

Her thoughts on *après-feminist* "reconstruction" are right out of *Good Housekeeping*: turn back the clock, reinstate the Golden Age. Erase all those deluded, deeply unhappy thinkers, beginning with Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, and Margaret Mead, and wipe away the feminist bile that has "put up dividing walls between men and women, love and sex, mothers and children." As if the sexes hadn't been living on different planets before feminism existed. One wonders where Steele, the self-appointed spokesperson and conservative activist, would be without her arch-enemy, that other, evil Betty, Betty Friedan — the Great Satan whom she vilifies almost to the point of deification.

I recommend that you read this book if only to get a taste of its psychology — and the hatred and hysteria, reminiscent of the Cold War, that fuel it. I found it bracing, in a way, to explore what passes for thought in the world of Real Women. Steele's personal hymn of praise to George and Barbara Bush in the preface is most instructive. If this is the alternative, we apparently have no choice: forward to androgyny!

I'd be remiss not to admit, however, that parts of the book actually tugged at my heartstrings. When Steele abandons her ridiculous, pseudo-intellectual pose and expresses her deepest fears for the future of the world's children, I'm inclined to listen, even sympathize — and this is the danger. Who isn't bewildered by our slide towards alienation and social breakdown? When she describes certain well-known feminist excesses, she also scores a point or two. But her amazing ruthlessness in blaming man-less women for all the miseries of Creation is nothing short of absurd — and a cautionary reminder of the repressive Ideology That Was.

An eerie religious message also creeps in as Steele discusses her belief that women should be limited to reproduction because their thoughts are inherently demonic. Needless to say, this book may strike a chord with people who also think Preston Manning will save Canada.

*Together Again* fails both as a diatribe and as kitsch. It raises spectres of suburban kitchens full of cross-stitched samplers and pink, checkered tablecloths, and asks a whole generation of Lost, Demented Women: "Wouldn't you rather live here?"

Uh, sorry, but the answer is still "no." ♦

# Lit(t)er-a(i)ry Crit-ic(k)-ism

*The postmodern critic would like to take us somewhere,  
but is it anywhere that we want to go?*

by MICHAEL DARLING

**F**OUR BOOKS of Canadian literary criticism by four women from three different English departments. If this were 1972, it would likely be impossible to find any common ideological thread to string them on. But in 1992 a reader can be assured of finding in any book issuing from an English department a set of shared assumptions about literature and how it should be approached. All four of these books are clearly indebted to poststructuralist notions of language and identity. While inevitably informed by feminist theory, these books rely much more heavily on the best-known male theorists: Bakhtin, Barthes, Benveniste, Benjamin, Deleuze, Foucault, Lacan, and, especially, Derrida. To this list should be added the name of Robert Kroetsch, who, as critic, novelist, poet, and theorist, is very much at the centre of the postmodernist and poststructuralist enterprise in Canada. That so many male and, on the basis of their writings, *patriarchal* thinkers should wield such influence over self-confessed feminist critics is a paradox that some brave soul (not I) might wish to explore.

As the most self-aware (if not the most self-centred) of the four, Sylvia Söderlind, in *Margin/Alas: Language and Colonization in Canadian and Québécois Fiction* (University of Toronto Press, 264 pages, \$45 cloth, \$17.95 paper), makes a number of telling observations about contemporary critical practices. She suggests, for instance, that "criticism may well reveal more about the critic's desire than about its presumed object..." Indeed, one of the more obvious elements of contemporary criticism is its subordination of author to critic, and primary to secondary text. Tired of being relegated to the margins of literature as mere interpreters, critics have taken centre stage with a vengeance, killed off the authors, and replaced them with their own circus act, cracking the theoretical whip, keeping the signifiers in play, and clowning behind the mask of subjectivity (for, as Söderlind reminds us — with tongue, I trust, at least partially in cheek — "no self-respecting critic would any longer lay claim to objectivity").

Despite the fact that they are unquestionably in charge of the show, however, poststructuralist critics like to think of themselves as marginalized guerrilla fighters, sniping at a com-

placent world confident of linguistic stability, unified identity, and political, sexual, and literary hierarchies. They seek to deconstruct the polarities they find, undermining the notions of determinate meaning and unchanging truth. For Susan Rudy Dorscht, in *Women, Reading, Kroetsch: Telling the Difference* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 138 pages, \$24.95 cloth), deconstruction and feminism are partners in the game: "I prefer," she says, "to see the project of undermining binary oppositions as necessarily a feminist project." For Sylvia Söderlind, postmodernist fiction is another willing ally of poststructuralist theory, with the postmodern novelist bringing to his or her work the same allegedly subversive assumptions about the nature of writing: the postmodern work, she writes, "problematizes the crucial notion of representation" and, like the critic, is "aware of its own imprisonment in language." Smaro Kamboureli, in *On the Edge of Genre: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem* (University of Toronto Press, 244 pages, \$45 cloth, \$18.95 paper), finds in the contemporary long poem the perfect match for a critical theory that continually discloses gaps and aporias, the endless displacements and dislocations that constitute language: "The long poem, then, makes itself felt through its discontinuities, its absences, and its deferrals by foregrounding both its writing process and our reading act." Finally, the novelist and critic Aritha van Herk, even more suspicious of language than her colleagues, proclaims herself, in *In Visible Ink: crypto-frictions* (NeWest, 218 pages, \$14.95 paper), happiest when free of words: "I long, finally, to escape the page, to escape ink and my own implacable literacy, altogether."

As the formal properties of postmodernist literature — discontinuity, self-reflexivity, linguistic instability — have come to be seen as its themes, the critic has become, by necessity, a thematic critic. All of these studies are, however sophisticated in methodology and terminology, essentially extensions of the thematic criticism of the 1970s. And, of course, the thematic critic always finds what she is looking for.

In her discussion of the long poem, Smaro Kamboureli is concerned, first of all, to define it. According to Kamboureli, the

genre "defines itself by resisting definition." In other words, the long poem is a poem that is all about its inability to be categorized. If this sounds strange, I should add that it would be difficult to find any postmodernist works that are not generically ambivalent or resistant to definition. Lyrics are found to interrogate lyricism, fictions question their fictive status, the drama confronts its own theatricality. Kamboureli never asks the obvious questions: how long is the long poem? how poetic is the long poem?

As for the word "contemporary," Kamboureli says, "it offers a frame of chronological relativity whose margins are not categorically determined and that, as a result, can exceed both in a forwards and backwards movement the ever-tentative line that designates contemporaneity." In other words, "contemporary" means whatever she chooses it to mean. With Humpty Dumpty logic, Kamboureli works her way through poems by Kroetsch, Marlat, Mandel, Nichol, Bowering, Cooley, and Ondaatje, managing to disguise their individuality by focusing on thematic similarities. Of Fred Wah's *Music at the Heart of Thinking*, she says, "It evades interpretation by making interpretation its theme." Dennis Cooley's *Bloody Jack* is described as "a book that defines its bookness intertextually." One might equally affirm that Garfield is a cat who defines his catness with reference to other cats. Crushing logic of this kind is an important part of the poststructuralist mystery, and Kamboureli is a faithful mystagogue.

Susan Rudy Dorscht has thoughtfully described her own critical methodology as "an uneasy mix of Western liberal feminism and French poststructuralism." This is akin to describing a meal as

an uneasy mix of *Joy of Cooking* liberalism and French *nouvelle cuisine*. The terms are so loose that they have no real meaning. She could just as well describe herself simply as a follower of Robert Kroetsch, for her book largely accepts him on his own terms, following up on Kroetsch's many useful suggestions for the analysis of his novels and poems. While the task that Rudy Dorscht has set herself — to examine the possibility of constructing a "feminist theory of subjectivity" from a reading of Kroetsch's texts — sounds intriguing, to say the least, the distinctive flavour of feminism is soon lost in the poststructuralist stewpot.

All the conventional techniques of deconstruction are here marshalled to escort Kroetsch's texts along the parade route to oblivion. Every character's name is a potential metaphor, every term can be divided by the use of parentheses into two or more words pregnant with additional, frequently contradictory, meanings (the chapter headings of Kroetsch's novel *Alibi* are described as "alter-na(rra)tive"), every theme has been magically anticipated by Derrida, whose omniscience has never been more sycophantically celebrated than it is here.

No matter how seemingly innocent the text, Rudy Dorscht wrestles it into submission. Here she comments on Kroetsch's poem, "Sketches of a Lemon":

The word "salmon" is not the word "oven" because, although they share the "o" and the "n" and their last syllables rhyme, the salmon has the "sal" (a pun on "salle"? room) and the oven doesn't. Is the "oven" not the lemon because it doesn't have an "l" and an "m" even though it does have the "o," "e," and the "n"?

She concludes by asking "Who knows?" followed by Kroetsch's line, "Now we're getting somewhere." Well, yes, but is it somewhere that any of us would want to go? If the only consequence of her critical lightheadedness were that Rudy Dorscht would not be the one asked to bring the lemonade to the next University of Calgary English department picnic, then no one would be the worse. Sadly, however, it is more likely that, confronted by linguistic lemon-squeezing of this sort, undergraduate English students (not all of whom can be fooled all of the time) will be switching their majors faster than you can say "computer science."

As a novelist, Aritha van Herk might have been expected to eschew academic jargon. But, as a postmodern novelist and professor of Canadian literature, she evidently feels the need to show off her academic respectability. Thus, the familiar themes of dislocation, unnamings, and indeterminacy are trotted out in *In Visible Ink*, couched in a deeply self-centred discourse that is made even more irritating by van Herk's insistence on referring to herself in the third person, or as "this I" or as the "fictioneer." Committed to the linguistic *mise en abyme*, van Herk sees everyone's fiction, including her own, in the same self-referential vortex: "Wallace haunts her stories. Her stories haunt her stories. They haunt their haunting of themselves." Her tributes to other writers are as moving as cryptic crossword puzzles, and there is throughout a desperate attempt to be profound, which belies her claim to desire experience "beyond language": "I am

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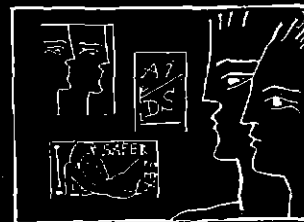
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### Fluid Exchanges:

Artists and Critics in the AIDS Crisis



Edited by James Miller

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suspended in an Arctic, not near Arctic or high Arctic but extreme Arctic, beyond all writing and its romance, beyond the intellectual comprehension or the geographical experience of most of those people calling themselves Canadians." In other words, for all you morons in southern Ontario who consider Georgian Bay to be the frozen northland, don't even bother trying to think about the real Arctic — you couldn't possibly understand it.

Sylvia Söderlind is a much better critic, who, while just as familiar with contemporary jargon as her colleagues, is not enslaved by it. She gets all the clichés of postmodernism out of the way in her introduction, and then sets about her task of providing extended readings of five novels: *Beautiful Losers*, *Trou de mémoire*, *The New Ancestors*, *L'Élan d'Amérique*, and *Gone Indian*. Her stated subject is language and colonization, but only the latter is dealt with in any depth. The individual chapters are relatively free of the circular logic of poststructuralist discourse, but the chosen novels are all those in which familiar postmodernist patterns of doubling, repetition, and *metamorphosis* are structural and thematic essentials. If Söderlind's readings, as detailed and stimulating as they are, explore no new directions in criticism, her conclusions are somewhat startling in their honesty. She admits that her "desire to engage with a text is often inversely proportionate to its resistance," which is to say what students have always suspected: professors take perverse delight in assigning the most problematic, the most difficult of texts, and then refuse to

explain what they mean. They're all about "the arbitrariness of the sign," an interpretation that the student will inevitably proffer on the final exam without ever knowing what it means.

Söderlind also posits a sadomasochistic relationship between reader and author that seems to parallel the relationship between colonizer and colonized in Canadian fiction. And she finds that "manipulation is not incompatible with pleasure." So both the puzzle-making "fictioneer" and the puzzle-solving critic engage in a kind of mutual intellectual masturbation, in which the real goals (course adoptions, tenure, all expenses paid to conferences in exotic locations) are never mentioned.

But if literary criticism is henceforth to be filed under the heading of "game theory" (if not with the sex manuals), it's clear that there are no winners or losers in this contest. That is, no evaluation ever takes place. We don't know, finally, how Kroetsch stacks up as a novelist next to Cohen, Aquin, or Godfrey (much less next to Atwood, Richler, or Laurence), or how his poetry compares with that of Nichol, Marlat, or Ondaatje. Is there development? Is there technical mastery? Why is there never any mention of style? All that seems to matter is theme, and the themes are, as the deconstructionists would say, "always already" fixed and unchanging. Along with everything else, the concept of *value* has been "problematized," and rather than attempt to make discriminations, the contemporary critic views everything with equal approbation, as long as it's appropriately self-regarding, terminally playful, and thematically correct. ♦

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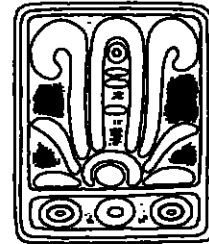
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# A Manning for All Seasons?

*Like it or not, the Reform Party could hold the balance of power after the next federal election*

by GEOFFREY STEVENS

SINCE ITS FOUNDING in 1987, the Reform Party of Canada has enjoyed a meteoric rise — in the public-opinion polls, at least. For most of the past year, Reform has run neck and neck with the governing Progressive Conservatives in the polls, with popular support in the 15-per cent range.

That doesn't sound like much until it is remembered that Reform still draws its heavy support from Alberta, with some from British Columbia and Manitoba, but not much from Saskatchewan (which tends not to trust populist movements with Alberta roots). The Reform Party does not exist in Quebec (for obvious reasons), is barely known in Atlantic Canada, and is still testing the waters in much of Ontario.

So, the 15 per cent looms larger than it might if it were distributed evenly and thinly across the country. The experts say that, given the way Reform support is concentrated in pockets, and the fact that no fewer than five significant parties will be dividing the vote in the next national election, Reform could walk away with anywhere from 40 to 80 seats.

Preston Manning — management consultant, son of a former Alberta premier, Social Credit retread, evangelical Christian, and one of the most uncharismatic politicians of his generation — could find himself the kingmaker in Ottawa. On the outer edge of possibility, this Bible-thumper could wind up as prime minister in a minority or coalition government.

In real terms, Reform does not have a



"Sheriff" Manning from *The New Canada*

track record to measure. It did nothing of note in the 1988 federal election, other than poll more votes in Alberta than the Liberals (which is something short of a noteworthy accomplishment). It won one federal by-election and a Senate election, both in Alberta — which speaks as loudly about the unpopularity of the Tories as it does for the prowess of the Reformers. It abandoned its national fund-raising campaign in 1991 when it produced only a fraction of

the hoped-for money. And it has proved an altogether too attractive haven for political fanatics, for rednecks who think it's smart or brave to wipe their feet on the flag of Quebec, and for bigots whose idea of politically correct attire is a hood and a white bedsheet.

Still, it's the perceived potential of Reform — those 40 to 80 seats — that makes it the hot story of the year. That's what has persuaded three publishers to rush out books on the party and its

leader. Interestingly, they are three very different books, and they will appeal to different audiences.

*The New Canada* is Manning's own painstaking account of his life and career, of the founding of the Reform Party, and its objectives on the national stage. It is written with all the flair of a (very long) political pamphlet. Dull and self-serving though *The New Canada* may be, it will be devoured by converts to Reform who need to believe that their cause is noble — that Reform is more than a party that does not care for immigrants and racial minorities, a party that seeks to dismantle medicare and other social programs, a party that would get along quite happily without Quebec.

*Storming Babylon*, by two journalists, the wife-husband team of Sydney Sharpe and Don Braid, is even-handed without being bland. Their approach is straightforward and informational, yet they manage to sound important alarms. Manning, they say, is asking voters to accept a political vision that is contrary to Canada's history of mixed public and private enterprise, to its traditional effort to find a compromise between individual and collective rights, and to its "eternal quest" to accommodate Quebec within Canada.

Equally worrying to Sharpe and Braid is Manning's religious fundamentalism:

In Preston Manning's life, evangelical Protestant religion is the first thing of all things, the source of his attitudes, beliefs, goals, and dreams. Politics is not an end in itself, but the road God has set him upon in this world: his path to personal salvation, his way of serving the Almighty. He is here on earth to earn his place in heaven and to take as many of us with him as he can manage.

Murray Dobbin's book, *Preston Manning and the Reform Party*, is everything that Manning's *The New Canada* is not — tough and critical. Dobbin, a Saskatoon writer and journalist, brings a left-wing perspective to his examination of a right-wing movement.

In his own book, Manning writes about his work as a management con-

sultant in developing the northern Alberta town of Slave Lake through a private company, Slave Lake Developments. Manning calls it "a local community development vehicle," and makes it sound like a public service to Native Canadians. But to Dobbin, Manning's efforts were distinctly less elevated. He writes about the conflicts of interest involving SLD and local politicians; four major SLD shareholders were town councillors who sold themselves town land for their first project. "[SLD was] simply entrepreneurial capitalism," Dobbin says. "It was exclusively a real estate development company, building apartment buildings and office space."

Dobbin worries that Canadians do not know what they would be getting if they elected Manning. Manning, he believes, is a malcontent who is alienated from the mainstream of Canadian politics and is marginal to modern Canadian society:

A self-proclaimed student of history, Preston Manning has learned little from it. History is change, and Canada, like other countries, has changed in the fifty-odd years since Ernest Manning [Preston's father] became premier of Alberta.

The irony, as Dobbin sees it, is that although Manning has built his party on the public's loathing of Brian Mulroney, a Reform government would have essentially the same agenda as the Mulroney government: "There is the possibility that angry voters will go to the polls to seek revenge against Brian Mulroney by voting Reform, only to find the next morning that they have given him a new lease on life."

Manning's political future, Dobbin argues, depends on the continuation of the constitutional impasse with Quebec. As long as that crisis continues, Manning can position himself as a spokesman for English Canada. But if the crisis is resolved, his voice will lose its distinctiveness and its influence. A period of calm would bring Reform Party policies under closer and more rational scrutiny, Dobbin believes — "to the certain disadvantage of that party."

## OH MORDECAI!

by George Galt

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### OH CANADA! OH QUEBEC!

by Mordecai Richler  
Penguin, 277 pages, \$14.99 paper  
(ISBN 0 14 016817 6)

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IT'S BEEN SAID that this book could reach the wrong hands. Unspeakable damage might be done. A public figure, Mordecai Richler should have exercised more responsibility.

What, you had to wonder, had the guy got hold of, the plans for some new smart bomb programmed to whistle down the chimneys of parliament?

Other criticisms have been: it's not helpful. It inflames the debate. He's wrong. He says things only for effect. He takes cheap shots. He's a racist. He's doing it for the money. And of course, the ultimate canard, from a Member of Parliament, no less: *It's hate literature and should be banned.*

So take your choice. According to his critics, the Quebec author is either a powerfully dangerous demagogue or an adolescent loud-mouth tossing off tasteless and ill-founded insults.

My own choice is none of the above. The inferno Richler's attackers have been fuelling turns out to be more a self-induced bonfire of their own vanities than any spiteful literary flame-throwing on his part. To discover that all you have to do is read the book, a bit of groundwork many of Richler's assailants apparently decided was unnecessary.

*Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!* offers, in its own discursive and entertaining way, a thorough primer to the Quebec Question as it has affected our peaceable kingdom during the Trudeau-Mulroney era, with emphasis on the period since the Parti Québécois was first elected to office in 1976. Whatever history a Texan (the title is also appearing in the United States) might require to understand the Jaberwockian political discourse of contemporary Canada is also provided. That sober outline doesn't begin to account for

the book's usefulness and vitality, but it's a fair thumbnail description and ought to dispel the shrill media hyperbole that implied Richler had been labouring over a twisted, drool-stained screed on Quebec anti-Semitism or had let loose a demented, racist blast against Quebec nationalism.

No. Any intemperate howls have come from those Quebec journalists and politicians Richler has offended with his telling of hard truths. The Quebec intellectuals who have howled the loudest include such influential figures as the editor of *Le Devoir*, Lise Bissonnette, and the author Jean-François Lisée, who is also an editor at the magazine *L'Actualité*. These otherwise intelligent, well-informed, and reasonable observers can't seem to accept Richler's heap of hard evidence that indicts the extremist version of Quebec nationalism as parochial and exclusionary.

First, the Quebec critics dislike his message intellectually, because Richler confronts all the contradictions in the secessionist argument, demonstrates wittily how asinine the inside/outside sign law is, and repeatedly uses the term "tribal" to define French Quebec's indisputably ethnocentric tendencies. Secondly, the francophone critics, judging by their blind rage, are viscerally uncomfortable as targets of Richler's mordant wit. No high-profile intellectual since Trudeau has been this tough on Quebec nationalists, and even Trudeau, a quick hip-shooter loaded with wilting put-downs, wasn't capable of the sort of deadly accurate, one-liner sarcasm Richler can administer. Thirdly, these critics are deeply embarrassed that an internationally acclaimed voice — which is, incidentally, better known outside Quebec than any of the province's francophone writers — is telling people in New York and Los Angeles about the Three Stooges farce of Quebec's sign laws and the absurdities of its sovereignty debate.

Richler has said that all the fuss about his comments on Quebec's anti-Semitic history, which amount to only a small fraction of his book, is a diversion to escape the language issue. The critics are happier, he believes, indignantly disputing his take on anti-Semitism than discussing the indefensible Bill 178. He may be right. Certainly on the sign law, he has them in an awkward corner. No matter how many lofty editori-



Mordecai Richler

als and speeches disavow 178 — several weighty francophone voices have questioned its appropriateness — it remains in place, apparently supported by much of the population. So Quebec nationalists still have to answer for it. If erasing signs of the other isn't a tribal impulse, I don't know what is. French Quebecers may bridle at the "tribalism" charge but, as Richler observes acidly,

When thousands of flag-waving nationalists march through the streets roaring "*Le Québec aux Québécois!*" they do not have in mind anybody named Ginsburg. Or MacGregor, come to think of it.

The harshest criticism of Richler's case that I've heard in English Canada is that Mordecai really went off the deep end when he remarked to Barbara Frum on *The Journal* in March that *Le Devoir* in the 1930s was interchangeable with the Nazi rag *Der Stürmer*. Certainly Lise Bissonnette flew into a literary rage in her editorial the next week, saying there were "no words to express the indignation, disgust, and anger we feel," and that "The appetite in Canada for his delirium is as odious to us as are his accusations."

Delirium? Well, maybe, but whose? "Interchangeable" was an unfortunate word for Richler to choose, but anyone who's read the evidence has to come away agreeing that French Canada's premier journal of public discourse was indeed explicitly and repugantly anti-Semitic during that period, "a decade," as Richler says more precisely in his book, "in which the racist effusions of *Le Devoir* more closely resembled *Der Stürmer* than any other newspaper I can think of." Granted, there's a difference in inflection between what he said and what he wrote, but just the same, *Le Devoir* does have a large and shameful stain on its history. Its editors, whatever else they think of Richler's work, would have better served their own cause by less shrill defensiveness and a little more reasoned contrition. It's exactly this impulse to deny the dark, "tribal" side of nationalism that got Richler onto his soapbox in the first place.

Some journalists, both English- and French-speaking, have implied that Richler should stick to fiction. Non-fiction, they suggest, is an onerous form requiring more reportorial legwork and more enthusiasm for plain, unadorned facts than the novelist will ever be able to muster. They complain that all he did for research was read books and sift through files at the

*Gazette* in Montreal. And oh yes, he doesn't speak French. The guy may need a haircut too, but it's all fine by me. Not only is the research, by whatever means, comprehensive, but the product, yet another tract on our desperate national politics, easily transcends the dreariness of its subject. Richler sees the human comedy between the constitutional clauses, but also voices the pressing grievances felt by Quebec's minorities. He's not trying to be "helpful" in the all-Canadian sense of tip-toeing around sensitive issues that might arouse some factions' ire. He tells it as he sees it. And if there were a prize for books that transform the Canadian constitution into an entertaining topic — a staggering oxymoron, I know — Richler would win it in a walk.

## RIPPING YARNS

by Pat Barclay

### THE GREAT CANADIAN ANECDOTE CONTEST

edited by George Woodcock  
*Harbour*, 142 pages, \$12.95 paper  
 (ISBN 1 55017 058 9)

### ROYAL OBSERVATIONS: CANADIANS & ROYALTY

edited by Arthur Bousfield and Garry Toffoli  
*Dundurn*, 237 pages, \$14.95 paper  
 (ISBN 1 55002 076 5)

HERE ARE two collections of anecdotes, each in a cause so worthy it's impossible to declare one more nobly motivated than the other. *The Great Canadian Anecdote Contest*, edited by George Woodcock and "sponsored and compiled by Canada India Village Aid [CIVA] on the occasion of its tenth anniversary," is a fund-raising project in aid of village and environmental rehabilitation and the training of health workers in some of the poorest areas of India. *Royal Observations: Canadians and Royalty*, compiled by Arthur Bousfield and Garry Toffoli, who also edit *Monarchy Canada*, marches stoutly to the relief of those who feel under siege as Mr. Parizeau strives to inflame Quebec and the federal

government pursues its dogged gutting of our national institutions. ("...Canadians have much more in common...than they perhaps acknowledge today," note Bousfield and Toffoli in their introduction. "Much, if not most, of that common experience revolves around the Monarchy, which is the most important shared institution within Canada.")

According to George Woodcock, anecdote is a "neglected art" today. That situation could change if these books find the public they merit. Each of them ranges through the emotional scale from poignant to hilarious, each succeeds in distilling an impressive amount of wit and wisdom, and each provides enough read aloud material to drive the most long-suffering spouse up the wall.

Woodcock credits Margaret Atwood for providing, in *Barbed Lyres* (Key Porter, 1990), an anthology of satire on behalf of *This Magazine*, a model "whose general format we found...excellent...and have shamelessly imitated." The best 50 anecdotes submitted to the CIVA contest were selected by a final committee of four distinguished judges: Silver Donald Cameron, George Galt, Vicky Gabereau, and Alan Twigg. They were then supplemented by invited "guest anecdotes" from 21 professional Canadian writers — well over half of the invitees responded to the appeal — and arranged by name in strictly egalitarian, alphabetical order except for the six prize-winners, who open the book.

A quick look at the winners gives the reader an idea of what to expect: four funny stories, two of them involving remarks from out of the mouths of babes; a moving account of strange coincidence, a phenomenon that occurs in various forms in nearly a third of the pieces included here; and a heart-warmer involving a whale trapped in a net, two fishermen who can't swim, and a rescue operation that takes place on the whale's back. (My own favourite, a yarn by the invited writer Ronald Wright, involves two "realtors" from Product, Saskatchewan, who find themselves marooned in the Australian outback in the company of a kangaroo.) Once begun, this collection is virtually unput-

downable and would be a safe bet as a welcome gift for absolutely everyone you know.

Provided you travel in monarchist circles, the same holds true for *Royal Observations*. This well-meant volume "does not aspire to be a comprehensive history....[I]t is rather a collection of snapshots" revealing the involvement of the Royals in "virtually all the major events that have shaped Canada," from George III's support of the Quebec Act in 1774 to Queen Elizabeth II's proclamation of the Constitution Act in 1982. Though not every item panned for inclusion turns out to be a nugget, the cumulative effect is dazzling. We learn, for example, that "je me souviens," the familiar motto of Quebec, originated with Eugène Tâché's evocation of the historic relationship between French Canada and the Crown: "je me souviens que né sous le lys je crûs sous la rose" ("I remember that born under the lily I have prospered under the rose"), and that "God Save the Queen" is probably an English adaptation of a French anthem written for Louis XIV. We are also treated to a gaggle of funny stories about how Canadians behave in the presence of royalty, such as the one about the hapless mayor who, having forgotten to wear his chain of office, explained to King George VI that he wore it only "on special occasions."

On the whole, however, *Royal Observations* is a serious attempt to remind us that our national heritage includes a political ideal that transcends mere party and racial loyalties, and functions as a national resource in times of emotional stress and political upheaval. Canadians who sometimes feel they're on a slippery slope to oblivion will welcome this book's message as something solid to hang onto.



# GRACE INCARNATE

by John Oughton



Lorna Crozier

## INVENTING THE HAWK

by Lorna Crozier

McClelland & Stewart, 160 pages, \$14.99 paper  
(ISBN 0 7710 2477 0)

MY DEADLINE wheels by. As I drive to work on a fast-developing edge of Brampton, Ontario, a hawk in a tree overlooks the highway; the hawk's eye meets mine like an editor's.

I'm dragging my reviewing feet because *Inventing the Hawk* is a hard book to do justice to: long, largely brilliant, definitely worth owning, variable in form and theme, and — like life — damn hard to sum up. Stumbling onto a

Lorna Crozier poem is like running into a tropical rainforest on the Prairies.

Crozier has written beautifully about the erotic life of vegetables in earlier poems. Here she explores family history, middle-aged love, her father's death, "angels" who incarnate grace in a post-God world. The book has four sections, and forms that range from short poems to long poems to prose poems.

How do you invent a hawk? Crozier, in her eighth book, offers two answers. One poem, "On the Seventh Day," suggests that God was too dreamy and abstract to create anything beyond

light and sky; his wife, stuck with the worldwork, had to whip up the animals on the last day, with no time to make them immortal.

Some feminist writers regard any such identification of woman with nature as biological determinism. They try to outwit the linear patterns of male-oriented grammar, root out sexism, and reveal the multiple values within words. Crozier's poetry, although deceptively conservative in form, is just as radical and distinct from male writing as that of her more blatantly experimental sisters. The words spring from her sense of her body, her conscious femaleness and sexuality, her honesty. Nearly every poem conjoins the physical world — of horses, wheat, a lover's touch — with the language she weaves to celebrate it.

Which is where her second answer comes in. Listen (and aren't the sounds wonderful?) how the title poem captures the first time poetry hit her:

She didn't believe the words  
when she first heard them, that  
blue  
bodiless sound entering her ear.  
But now something was in the air,  
a sense of waiting as if  
the hawk itself were there...

So the source of the poem is external, natural; but to be embodied in a poem, the "hawk" needs something else: "Already she had its voice, / the scream that rose from her belly."

Classical rhetoric divided the process of persuasion into several steps. Rhetoricians analysed every possible figure of speech and method of persuasion, but had relatively little to say about the first and most mysterious step: *inventio*, creation itself. Crozier — as this book, almost too long and rich for one helping of poetry, demonstrates — is endlessly inventive, comfortable in that mystery's heart. And her best poems achieve the exalted state she imagines as her final invention, "the radiant, uninvented blades of glass." Like God's wife, she has made them so well they are natural.

# MILITARY ENGAGEMENTS

by Donald Swainson

were more than anxious to participate in the Boer War. And, of course, our contribution to the two world wars was massive. In both instances we went to war long before the Americans and mobilized a relatively large number of persons to serve in the army, navy, and air force. We also, in these cases, con-

tributed heavily in food, equipment, and money. This extensive military history is as important as it is interesting, as these two new books ably demonstrate.

J. L. Granatstein and Desmond Morton have already written two excellent books about Canada and the world wars: *Marching to Armageddon: Canadians and the Great War 1914-1919* and *A Nation Forged in Fire: Canadians and the Second World War 1939-1945*. *War and Peacekeeping*, written by Granatstein and David Bercuson, completes the tril-



Contact by Ted Zuber from *War and Peacekeeping*

## WAR AND PEACEKEEPING: FROM SOUTH AFRICA TO THE GULF — CANADA'S LIMITED WARS

by J. L. Granatstein and David J. Bercuson  
Key Porter, 266 pages, \$39.95 cloth  
(ISBN 1 55013 355 1)

## THE VALOUR AND THE HORROR: THE UNTOLD STORY OF CANADIANS IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

by Merrily Weisbord and Marilyn Simonds Mohr  
HarperCollins, 171 pages, \$29.95 cloth  
(ISBN 0 00 215744 6)

ONE OF the standard works on Canadian military history is G. F. G. Stanley's *Canada's Soldiers: The Military History of an Unmilitary People*. That title sums up a fair amount concerning

the assumptions that many Canadians have about their military past. We like to believe that we are not as aggressive or militaristic as Europeans or Americans. In some ways this assumption is at least partially correct. Canada has not been an aggressor nation given to wars of conquest; at the same time we have in no way eschewed the use of military force if we deemed it a proper way to solve a given problem.

Very shortly after the birth of Canada in 1867, we started a long process of using the armed forces. We despatched military expeditions to western Canada in 1870 and 1885 that were designed to pacify the rebellious Métis. Many Canadians, primarily anglophones,

by taking us through our pre-First World War and post-Second World War conflicts. Granatstein and Bercuson describe our battles with the Fenians and the two expeditionary forays into the prairies. Our African adventures, on the Nile in the north and the Boer War in the south, are also recounted, and Canadian participation in Korea takes up about a third of the volume. Finally, we receive a careful account of the various peacekeeping operations in which Canada has participated.

Granatstein and Bercuson's research is impeccable, and the book is nicely organized and well written. It is also very well illustrated, with dozens of well-selected black-and-white photographs,



sketches, and maps, and offers a smaller number of colour illustrations, some of which are superb. *War and Peacekeeping* is a highly suitable finale to a trilogy that provides Canadians with a truly distinguished account of their military past.

*The Valour and the Horror*, by Merrily Weisbord and Marilyn Simonds Mohr, is a different kind of work altogether. It is based on a television series (also titled "The Valour and the Horror") directed by Brian McKenna. This series was concerned with Canadian involvement in three aspects of the Second World War: the futile British/Canadian attempt to defend Hong Kong from the Japanese and the subsequent horrors visited by the Japanese upon the captured Canadian troops; the involvement of Canadian airmen in "Bomber Command," the air war that carried heavy bombing into the heart of Nazi Germany; and the Canadian role in the Normandy invasion. Brian McKenna and his fellow writers Terence McKenna and Roman Jarymowycz based their scripts on hundreds of interviews with survivors of those operations, and film was shot in a wide variety of places.

Weisbord and Mohr then turned the television series into a book, a process that reverses the normal relationship between film and print, and the result is thoroughly acceptable. The authors produce what is really a set of social profiles of the implications of war for those who fought and for those who were subject to its effects. The stories of the various participants are heart-rending and, perhaps most important, make clear the permanent imprint that these events made on individual lives. Hundreds of thousands of Canadians were profoundly influenced by their wartime activities, as a reading of *The Valour and the Horror* makes very clear.

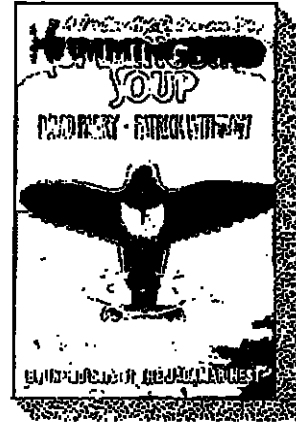
The military history of Canada merits a great deal of attention. *The Valour and the Horror* and *War and Peacekeeping* are more than welcome additions to the literature, and deserve to be read and appreciated.

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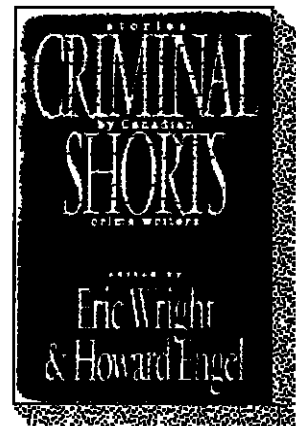
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# THE MAN OF HER DREAMS

by Carole Giangrande



Joan Barfoot

## PLAIN JANE

by Joan Barfoot

Macmillan, 243 pages, \$24.95 cloth  
(ISBN 0 7715 9157 8)

THE PROTAGONIST of Joan Barfoot's new novel is a timid soul with a Technicolor inner life that gives the lie to her nickname. As a quiet, lonely librarian who hankers after passionate romance, Jane Smith is hardly the first of her kind in fiction. Yet in Barfoot's sensitive telling, Jane's imagination is a force for good. It goads and pushes her to hope for abiding love and friendship in the real world.

As the story opens, Jane Smith is responding to an ad in the paper from a con in the slammer looking for a pen-pal. Why is shy Jane doing this? Maybe it's her diet of romance novels, but it's also some mysterious nudging within, "a kind of turning over of her heart" that allows her to sit down and compose a letter. She knows it's risky; she doesn't have a clue about this guy, or what sort of crime he's committed. Jane feels she has little to say to him about her dull job at the library, and at the youthful age of 28, she's saddened by her plain and mousy looks. Yet she's somehow convinced herself that their encounter is inevitable, and therefore sure to succeed.

Safely enclosed in this fantasy, Jane is free to imagine her prisoner as a remarkable man. She sees him as handsome, physically strapping but not scruffy, a decent sort who, sadly, went wrong and who could do with a bit of redemptive love. Grimly realistic readers might miss the point. If you think women are (or should be) past all that schlock, bear in mind that for the first time, Jane has dared to hope in life, albeit in tried-and-true clichés.

When the prisoner, Brian Dexter, sends her an enthusiastic reply, their mail-order friendship takes off. Jane begins to believe the impossible might happen, and so she starts to add to her life the small, everyday pleasures taken for granted by less timid people. She pretties up her apartment, takes to indulging herself in cut flowers and stylish clothing, knits Brian a sweater, and imagines the domestic pleasures of dining, sex, and children. Her unaccountably cheerful mood draws her into friendships, some of them with people in difficult straits whose needs draw her out of her imaginary world.

Then, harsher realities begin to intrude. Her mother, attractive and antagonistic, arrives and informs Jane that she's suffering from terminal cancer. Jane has stored up years of jealousy and resentment toward her. She only begins to feel compassion for her mother's suffering when she faces her own dilemma: is dream-man Dexter too much of a risk in the real world?

According to the police, he is. They fill Jane in on his record and advise her to steer clear. Having come this far, Jane is stuck between the equally painful risks of lonely fantasy and fearful life.

Barfoot writes with genuine compassion for the dilemma of a character who is likeable, but often genteel to the point of prissiness. In a nice echo of Victorian style, there's even a narrator who butts in, makes comments, and digresses. Without this elbow in the ribs, some of us might not believe that Jane's fantasies are for real in the "realistic '90s." And yet they are. In its own brave, uncomplicated way, *Plain Jane* speaks the truth about imagining and hope, and their power to change us.

# SPEAKING WITH AUTHORITY

by Adrienne Kertzer

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## PORTAGE LAKE: MEMORIES OF AN OJIBWE CHILDHOOD

by Maude Kegg, edited by John D. Nichols  
University of Alberta Press, 272 pages, \$29.95 cloth,  
\$19.95 paper (ISBN 0 88864 216 4 cloth,  
0 88864 217 2 paper)

## DANCING WITH A GHOST: EXPLORING INDIAN REALITY

by Rupert Ross  
Ocupus, 169 pages, \$15.95 paper  
(ISBN 0 409 90648 4)

## AN ANTHOLOGY OF CANADIAN NATIVE LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

edited by Daniel David Moses and Terry Goldie  
Oxford University Press, 393 pages, \$19.95 paper  
(ISBN 0 19 540819 5)

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Consequently what emerges is the white academic's imperfect understanding or interpretation of what Indians are all about, rather than the facts in Indian terms.

THIS COMMENT by Harold Cardinal, found in "A Canadian *What the Hell It's All About*" and now included in *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*, addresses a problem currently much debated: that of speaking for and speaking about, of translation, of a white reviewer like me describing books that to varying degrees are produced by white writers/editors. As a white academic, the reviewer is aware that she is no authority on "the facts in Indian terms." At the same time she is aware there is value in reporting her understanding of these three books, in hopes that by speaking about them she enables the Native voices in the texts to be heard. This is her white academic's imperfect understanding, and she writes by it.

In terms of intended audience, these books are very different. Maude Kegg's *Portage Lake: Memories of an Ojibwe Childhood* is the most focused. Edited and transcribed by John D. Nichols, a professor

of Native studies and linguistics at the University of Manitoba, the book is a dual-language edition of the stories Kegg told Nichols. Twenty-five of Kegg's stories were published in 1978 as *Gabekanaansing/At the End of the Trail*. This new collection contains 16 additional stories as well as a glossary and revised transcriptions and translations of the previously published tales; it will benefit students of the Ojibwe language, as well as anyone interested in its preservation.

Nichols's introduction describes the process of recording and transcribing the stories. He points out where the translation — because of English conventions — may mislead the non-speaker of Ojibwe, e.g., his use of paragraphs, punctuation, and capitalization. The collection is divided into four sections by season, again an organizing principle that Nichols has applied, not something traditional to Ojibwe classification. The result is, as he describes it, a compromise between the desire for literal transcription and the avoidance of awkwardness.

It is also admirable in its scholarly presentation and sensitivity to issues of both translation and transmission from oral to written form. Even the reader who is not a student of Ojibwe will find Kegg's stories captivating and her references to the limits of memory poignant. So many of her stories conclude, "That's all I remember of what I did." One senses that there is so much more that we can never know because she no longer remembers. In his introduction, Nichols describes the history of the Anishinaabeg at Mille Lacs, Minnesota: whites tried to force the Anishinaabeg to another reserve, and by 1911 only 284 Natives remained in the area. Maude Kegg's family was part of this group. Born in 1904, she became in 1968 a guide at what is now the Minnesota Historical Society's Mille Lacs Indian Museum.

Often we are left puzzling at the nature of memory, at what exactly she recalls: "That's what happened to me. All sorts of things happened to me when I was a little girl. I couldn't tell all of it." Couldn't because she is unable, or couldn't because she chooses not to? What is the relationship between memory and invention? The old man who frightened her because he

wanted to marry her and called her his garden, who she feared would eat her up: if she so feared him, why did she go to him and feed him some fry bread? The narrative does not say:

Oh my, he was just glad that I was feeding him that bread, that big old man sitting there. "Hah, I'm full. I won't eat you up." That's all I remember. I don't know what happened to me after that.

Discussing totems in one of her stories, Kegg claims that the bald eagles were Canadians, a group her grandmother told her were "ignorant... about the Indian way... almost white people." Rupert Ross, in *Dancing with a Ghost: Exploring Indian Reality*, argues very differently. Natives are not almost whites, at least not the Ojibwe and Cree Natives whom he sees as still culturally influenced by their hunter-gatherer roots. A criminal lawyer in Kenora, Ontario, since 1982 and currently the assistant Crown attorney for the District of Kenora, Ross has concluded that the legal system fails Canada's Native peoples because it does not recognize the existence and validity of very different cultural practices. He sees whites and Natives as culturally far apart, and hopes ultimately for a "Canadian culture which includes elements of both cultures."

How this new culture will be created is not exactly clear, but the first stage is that whites learn to listen to Natives (the irony that a white writer writes this is not noted). *Dancing with a Ghost* is addressed not to lawyers (although Basil Johnston's prefatory comments imply that it is), but to whites who have never considered the possibility that Natives don't necessarily think exactly the same way as whites, and who are not bothered by the implied premise that all whites think the same way or the equivalent premise that hunter-gatherer-descended Natives think the same way. Ross is impassioned, and deeply disturbed that the criminal justice system, of which he is a part, is so destructive. Hence the best parts of his text are the personal anecdotes describing his own experiences both inside and outside the legal system.

But the structure of the book is a mess. The lack of footnotes and the non-aca-

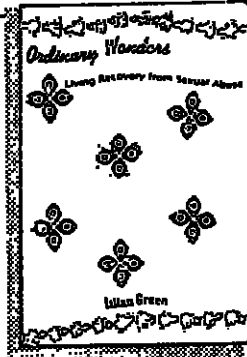
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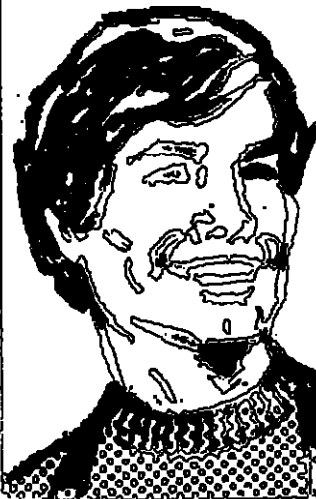
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- EVEN MORE KIDLIT: HOW YOUTH SEES IT!

democratic approach are not the issue. In his preface, Ross states that his approach is circular, deliberately not linear, but *Dancing with a Ghost* is in fact incredibly repetitive. Surely a better-edited book would be more likely to persuade its readers. And at a time when Native writers comment how tired they are of whites interpreting them, Ross's text is primarily interesting for what it reveals about the impact of Native culture on him. He is certainly not arrogant. He admits his limitations (including not knowing any Native languages) and his continuing puzzlement at many Native rules of behaviour, and he apologizes at the beginning to Native people whom he is sure to misrepresent. Unfortunately, given the way he writes, all Natives seem representative, interchangeable types.

Ross's argument that the white adversarial legal system is totally alien to a culture based on consensus decision-making is convincing; many Native practices, e.g., avoiding eye contact, expecting children to learn by their own experiences, and preferring healing and teaching to punishment, make the white courtroom a place where white and Native misunderstand each other. On the other hand, he is rather paternalistic in imagining the problems of Native self-government, and very romantic (although he denies this) about the pleasures of hunter-gatherer societies. Whites are similarly stereotyped as alienated, and non-spiritual.

Basil Johnston's preface concludes:

If Mr. Rupert Ross can convince his learned friends to look anew at the adversarial character of litigation and to examine the First Nations peoples' concept of human nature and human misconduct, and their manner of setting right an errant man or woman, he will have performed a service of great benefit.

Whether *Dancing with a Ghost* achieves this ambitious end, its publication testifies to the profound impact Native culture has had upon the author.

In contrast, *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English* is an example of the ironies that result when a white publishing house decides to present the facts in Native terms. Described in its own introduction as a "symbol of empire," Oxford

University Press shows how publishers are redefining their lists of what is marketable. This in itself is controversial for the co-editors, the Native poet and playwright Daniel David Moses and the York University professor Terry Goldie. Why are they engaged in this project? Goldie in particular seems concerned to explain his motives, not just because he is white but because of his own discomfort with the notion of a canon:

I certainly want people to respect this anthology and find it interesting, but I would feel personally a bit of a failure if people thought that it therefore establishes what is the best in Native writing, or even establishes what is the best in Native writing in 1992.

Anthologies do canonize regardless of the editors' declarations, especially those directed at educational markets, but Goldie wants to free himself of the guilt of the anthologist. Since he is apparently not interested in aesthetic evaluation, what principles guided the editorial selections are not clear.

In place of a traditional introduction that interprets the anthology, Moses and Goldie have substituted a transcription of a dialogue, a reminder both of the roots of Native literature in the oral tradition and the fact that there is no single voice or reading of this material. Goldie speaks of his own reluctance to write about Native writing, his preference to instead help provide a space for Native writers. He notes that he and Moses are most interested in writing published since 1985; two-thirds of the anthology is by people born since 1940. Moses presents himself as more practical, less ambivalent about his role as an editor, and more concerned that readers learn that Native writers are not always traditional storytellers.

The anthology that results is varied, moving from traditional songs and orature to autobiographical narratives, political speeches, poems, short stories, and excerpts from plays and novels. Although the 42 voices are very different, what unites the collection is the issue of language: language and silence — "I lost my talk / The talk you took away" (Rita Joe); language and its disappearance and the problem of shoddy translation — "Some tribal languages are at the edge of extinction, not expected to sur-

vive for more than a few years" (Basil Johnston); language and power — "The Disempowerment of First North American Native Peoples and Empowerment Through Their Writing" (the title of Jeannette Armstrong's paper). The excerpts from *Halfbreed*, *April Raintree*, *The Rez Sisters*, and *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* make the reader want more; the anthology as a whole speaks powerfully for the energy and variety of Native writing in Canada today. Canonical or not, *An Anthology of Native Literature in English* does attempt to give readers "the facts in Indian terms."

## ROUGHING UP À LA BUSH

by David Stafford

### GEORGE BUSH'S WAR

by Jean Edward Smith

Fitzhenry & Whiteside, \$25 paper, \$31.50 cloth  
(ISBN 0 8050 1388 1)

NEVER SPIT on a man's moustache," goes a common Arab saying, "unless it's on fire." This admonition not to insult an opponent's dignity was frequently and knowingly broken by President Bush in the run up to Desert Storm, the liberation of Kuwait. On several occasions he compared the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein with Adolf Hitler; and to a group of congressmen in December 1990 he boasted that if war came Saddam would "get his ass kicked." When he spoke to the country on 16 January 1991, the day war began, he mentioned Saddam's name 20 times.

This personalization of the conflict is the dominant theme of this lucid, succinct, and eminently readable analysis of the origins of the Gulf War. Jean Edward Smith, a professor of political science at the University of Toronto, won its 1991 Best Teaching Award. One can see why. He writes directly and clearly, and avoids the miserable jargon deployed by so many of his colleagues. His concern is with presidential power and its abuse. An expert on the US constitution and US foreign policy, he believes, and convincingly demonstrates, that from the

beginning George Bush sought to flex his presidential muscle and bypass Congress whenever he could. As commander-in-chief, the president of the United States has always exercised tremendous executive power. Bush pushed this to the limit, working with a small coterie of colleagues in the National Security Council, often ignoring the joint chiefs of staff, and almost precipitating a major constitutional crisis by his neglect of congressional opinion.

Hence the notion that this was "George Bush's war." Smith makes a strong case. He, like others, believes that the president was persuaded to take a hard line on Iraq's invasion of Kuwait by Margaret Thatcher. The British prime minister happened to be visiting the United States at the time, and the two met at Aspen, Colorado, where the Iron Lady convinced Bush that the loss of Kuwait was analogous to the sell-out of Czechoslovakia at Munich. As a 16-year-old schoolboy at Andover in 1940, Bush had been electrified by a speech by the former secretary of state, Henry Stimson, denouncing Hitler as a bully of small countries and saying how much he envied young Americans who had the opportunity to stand up for good against evil. Smith believes this left an indelible impact on Bush. Fired up by Thatcher 50 years later, the US president experienced the struggle against Saddam as the moral equivalent of the Second World War.

From there, all else flowed. At no point did Bush seriously seek to negotiate. The military build-up was quick and massive. Alternative options were blocked off. Sanctions were given no chance to work. When war came, it was a war that Bush had determined on almost from the beginning. The president gets full marks from Smith for his diplomatic and political skills in building and maintaining the coalition against Saddam. His manipulation of public opinion was masterly. But the end result of a war brilliantly conducted was, Smith believes, of dubious worth. "The destructive consequences of the conflict, the enormous toll of human suffering, the unsolved problems of the region," he concludes, "make clear the utter folly of George Bush's war."

Utter folly? Perhaps, but this is not a conclusion that flows from the evidence. The single-minded focus of the book on Bush and US decision-making means that Smith

tells us little about the Middle East, before or after the conflict, and even less about other world leaders who likewise determined to expel Iraq from Kuwait. Indeed, Smith appears to see every other world leader (Margaret Thatcher excepted) as a virtual puppet of Bush. That they had beliefs, interests, and agendas of their own is hardly considered. That the world community might have had a genuine interest in overturning the occupation of Kuwait and checking Iraq's ambitions is likewise not discussed. The consequences of *not* using force against Iraq are hardly examined. Smith, an American by origin, has been quoted as saying that he is a "yellow dog Democrat" who would vote for a yellow dog before he'd vote for a Republican. His book is a damning indictment of Bush. But in its own way *George Bush's War* is as determined and skillful an effort as the president's own road to war. And as seductive, partisan, and selective.

## LONGING FOR HOME

by Douglas Hill

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### UHURU STREET

by M. G. Vassanji  
McClelland & Stewart, 144 pages, \$14.99 paper  
(ISBN 0 7710 8717 9)

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DAR ES SALAAM, on the coast of Africa looking eastward across the Indian Ocean toward India, and Metro Toronto's Scarborough, winter fields to the north, "a bleak landscape with a few brambles blown by a light wind" — such are the antipodes of M. G. Vassanji's fictional world. In the 16 interlocked stories of this, his first collection (coming after two novels), he offers carefully focused snapshots of personal history. *Uhuru Street* is a sort of contemporary album of the Asian settlement that first established itself as the middle class in colonial Tanganyika in the late 1800s, saw its position made precarious when independent Tanzania was created in 1961, and then began gradually to disperse, in substantial part through emigration to Canada, during the years that followed.

The arrangement of the stories in this

volume underscores the cultural journeys of Vassanji's subjects. The first nine pieces, all short, are in a minor key; most are narrated by a young boy who lives with his mother, brothers, and sisters above their small family shop in Dar es Salaam. Each details a significant childhood or adolescent moment touched with significance. The common thread is anxiety, the child's puzzlement as he encounters one mystery (or terror) after another, usually in the shape of the obscurely defined otherness of adults.

In the second part of the book the stories, longer and sometimes more diffuse, range further; their titles — "Leaving," "Breaking Loose," "The London-returned," "Refugee" — indicate Vassanji's broader concerns. The central theme is now emigration, the effects of the twinned imperatives of education and economic betterment on young adults who choose to trade all the safe if suffocating certainties of friends and family, Dar and Uhuru Street, for the cold confusions — otherness once again, now Cultural with a capital C — of Europe and North America. Clear images of loss fill these later stories, as well as shadows of muted desire, unrealized joy, surprising loneliness.

In the final story, "All Worlds Are Possible Now," the narrator comes home, back to Dar, back to the rituals of place and community. Likely he will stay. "There was an element of escape in my return," he muses, "as there was once in my leaving." Tentatively he reclaims his past, retraces his youth, finds a relationship that promises then disappoints. The lesson? "When it comes down to it, there is only a plain longing for a home, a permanence."

*Uhuru Street* works quietly; Vassanji's instrument is irony, not indignation. There is little overt violence or sex in the stories, but when it does occur it's all the more powerful for being understated. Subtle racism (or sexism or classism) may not draw blood; for Vassanji's characters the scars are inward. Disarmingly simple surfaces mask complex questions, while the voices of the narrators, funny, sardonic, melancholy, provide the reader an opportunity for intellectual distance and emotional sympathy.

There is much in this volume to admire: pace, timing, economy of means, richness of effect. *Uhuru Street* does its work quietly and purposefully; Vassanji's confident skill is impressive.

# PRISONERS OF CIRCUMSTANCE

by Daniel Jones

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## HOW DO YOU SPELL BEAUTIFUL?

by Patrick Lane

Fifth House, 192 pages, \$19.95 cloth  
(ISBN 0 92007998 9)

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Hemingway, it was not like any story I had ever read. That same year I had published my first and last collection of poetry and was making the painful transition to prose, and Lane's story influenced me as much as anything I can remember.

It has taken another seven years for Lane to publish his first collection of stories, *How Do You Spell Beautiful?* He has, of course, continued to publish collections of poetry for which he is widely respected.

His *Poems New and Selected* won the Governor General's Award in 1978, and his two most recent collections have both been short-listed — *Winter* in 1990 and *Mortal Remains* in 1991.

Like "Rabbits," the 20 stories in *How Do You Spell Beautiful?* are bleak portraits of men and women trapped in circumstances they can neither comprehend nor change. Most of the stories are set in company towns in the interior of British Columbia, where mill workers and their families live huddled together in trailers, united only by poverty and violence. In "Marylou Had Her Teeth Out," a young girl has the stitches ripped from her gums by her father. In "Sing Low," two brothers pick up two women while driving through Alberta. One woman has been badly beaten and gives birth to a stillborn baby in the back seat of the car. Clinging to one of the brothers, she is destined to repeat the past.

Male sexuality and violence permeate these stories. Lane is less successful when writing from a woman's point of view, as in "Irene Good Night," where the narrator's ruminations on her husband's brutality fail to convince. Women, however, can and do escape. In "Burning Wings," one of the finest stories in this collection, a woman is exchanged from one man to another to pay off a debt. She manages, however, to escape her captor — but only by murdering him.

As well as the underlying humanity in his narrative voice, it is the very artistry of Lane's prose that saves his characters. He uses modifiers sparingly and simile hardly at all. There is little dialogue. It is what Lane has left out, what is silent, that ultimately speaks for these characters and their desperate lives.

# ELEGANT CONCISIONS

by Douglas Glover

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## DEEP HOLLOW CREEK

by Sheila Watson

McClelland & Stewart, 126 pages \$14.95 paper  
(ISBN 0 7710 8823 X)

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SHEILA WATSON's *Deep Hollow Creek* belongs on a long shelf of Anglo-colonial novels in which civilized white women go to the bush, fall under the spell of darker people's gods, and come away repelled or changed (see, for example, the works of E. M. Forster and D. H. Lawrence). The white women stand for an etiolated European culture striving to revive itself with a transfusion from the primitive (read sex, the body, nature, blood, instinct). But the primitive often turns out to be dangerously ambiguous or, at best, mysteriously indifferent.

In *Deep Hollow Creek*, Stella, a spinster schoolteacher, comes to British Columbia's Cariboo country one autumn "to find life for herself." What she finds instead is a claustrophobic valley inhabited by enigmatic Shuswap Indians and intensely inward-looking, jealous, and gossipy settlers left behind in the backwash of a played-out gold-rush. Stella stays through the winter, experiences the resurrection of spring, tries in vain to connect with the Natives, then leaves, wondering if she is mad or if the settlers (or the Natives) are mad.

The white inhabitants of the valley comprise three families — Bill and Mamie Flowers and their long-suffering factotum, Mockett, Sam and Rose Flowers and their five children, and the Farishes, a childless couple on the outskirts of the settlement. Watson retails their lives with a pungent wit and a wealth of precise detail (for such a short book) — down to school-tax payments and water rights along the creek.

Mamie Flowers is the *grande dame* of Deep Hollow Creek, given to fainting



Patrick Lane

PATRICK LANE's first published story, "Rabbits," appeared in the April 1985 issue of the *Canadian Forum*. (It would later win a National Magazine Award.) The story of a frustrated mill worker and his oppressed wife, "Rabbits" offers a brutally honest yet compassionate portrayal of the lives of the working poor and the inability of men and women to communicate their needs and desires to one another. More compelling, however, is Lane's control of language. Each sentence is a tiny, perfect story in itself.

At that time, American writers such as Raymond Carver and Richard Ford were not well known in Canada. While "Rabbits" was clearly indebted to

spells and protracted winter illnesses during which Bill and Mockett must cook, pay court, and empty her chamber pot. Mamie came to Canada from England in response to a letter from the Flowers paterfamilias, Adam, hoping to marry money and drag Bill back to England. Now, she and Bill and Mockett run the store and the Stopping House, the centre of valley civilization. Up the hill, Sam and Rose dwell in rural isolation, envious of the richer, more cultured Flowerses below. Rose refuses to leave their homestead except to have her babies and, once, to come down and insult Mamie at the school party.

Stella's arrival causes all these relationships to change, to adjust slightly, like a pebble hitting a still pool. Nothing much happens in *Deep Hollow Creek*, but a lot happens, if you see what I mean. The characters manoeuvre to gain the privilege (and income) of boarding the teacher, selling her a horse, entertaining her. The teacher, in her turn, tries to disentangle herself from petty social obligations by renting a cabin by herself, buying a horse, and hiring Indians to cook and clean for her.

There is no rising dramatic action in this book, no narrative climax. What there is is an extremely cunning and ironic interweaving of village squabbles and cosmic themes. About where the climax of the novel should be there is an elaborate scene rife with poetic allusion. Stella, riding home from a visit to the Farishes, encounters a pair of young bulls tearing up dirt and fretting their intemperate maleness. She ponders the castration of cattle — the constant tumult of nature and its struggle with the culture that seeks to cut it off and control it.

Then she heard an undulating voice crying. Throw off the bands of custom, break down the barriers. Nature stirs deep within you. I am the primitive urge, out of the blastoderm endlessly calling.

*Deep Hollow Creek* has the studied elegance and concision of *The Double Hook*, Watson's first published novel, although *Deep Hollow Creek* was originally written in the 1930s. It also shares the layers of

symbolism (flames and light = life, darkness = death), Biblical, classical and literary allusion, and the overarching reference to Native mythology (Coyote, the Shuswap trickster god, shadow within shadow, watches over everything) that made Watson's earlier novel a source of endless delight for academic critics.

But a deep vein of irony runs through this book, a subtle lightness that takes the reader by surprise and helies the dated romanticism of Watson's theme. There is a hilarious scene, for example, when Mockett and Bill Flowers get drunk and drop the vaporous Mamie on the floor not once but twice. The backwoods burlesque of the opening scene of Act IV of *Macbeth* during the school party is delicious.

... Though you untie the winds and let them fight

Against the hay stacks; though the muddy

Fraser

Confound and swallow all prospectors up

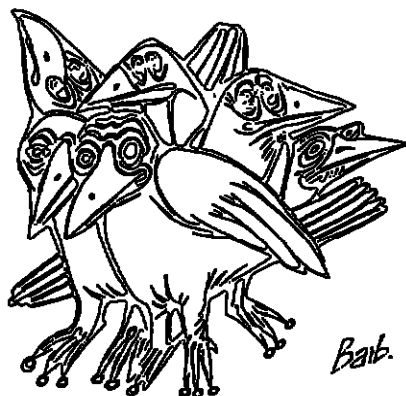
Though the range and rolling hills Do slope their heads to narrow Deep Creek,

Though Russian Thistle and alfalfa mate

together

Answer me.

*Deep Hollow Creek* ends with a gently mocking note — Stella watching a pair of grouse mating and thinking of Mamie teaching Bill the hesitation waltz — and a vision of the generous and ineluctable welling up of nature, the mysterious life force only just hidden beneath a flimsy veil of culture. This parallelism is vintage Watson and the epitome of her art.



BOOKS IN CANADA

## GRADATIONS OF EXPENSE

by Phil Hall

### WEST INTO NIGHT

by Glen Sorestad  
*Thustedown*. 63 pages. \$11 paper  
 (ISBN 0 420633 47 0)

### AFTER ATLANTIS

by Gary Hyland  
*Thustedown*. 80 pages. \$11 paper  
 (ISBN 0 420633 88 9)

### YOU DON'T GET TO BE A SAINT

by Patrick Friesen  
*Turnstone*. 96 pages. \$9 95 paper  
 (ISBN 0 88801 163 6)

YES, THE LESSER truths are also true, but they are not as revelatory or as useful: poetry, like all products, comes in ranges of quality — quality not as a judgement of worth, but of expense (how much inner truth the author is willing to spend).

Gradations of expense are evident in these three poetry books. There are adequate, publishable poems that do not aspire to be masterpieces — they are not so inclined; their poesy may not care for the rigours of ambition. They are the wise poems that I call "the undriven." Glen Sorestad writes poems of this sort:

*Was snow ever so white, ever so deep  
 as the winters the child in me  
 remembers?*

*Were the days ever so cold?*

("Winter Myths")

There is another type of poetry that I call "the overly gifted." Too smart for its own good, such poetry wears a trunkful of masks and seldom shows an actual face. Gary Hyland's poetry is of this sort:

*Gloss, floss, froth and fluff — O  
 the lightness of the brightness  
 will bubble you through*

("Becoming Dead")



A type of poem I call "the driven" comes in two forms: the driven-to-health-for-wisdom (for example, Elizabeth Bishop's work) and the driven-to-destruction-for-wisdom (John Berryman's work). Patrick Friesen writes a healthy form of "driven" poem:

*if it's chosen  
silence is not an enemy  
it is where words begin and end  
silence is the heart's chamber  
between beats*

("silence")

It's true that Glen Sorestad is "a leading figure in Prairie literature," as the cover blurb notes, but *West into Midnight* is ploddingly wistful, full of the "clichés of rhythm as well as of phrase" that D. H. Lawrence once praised Whitman for pruning from his work. I liked Sorestad's *Prairie Pub Poems* better. At least they weren't this close to nostalgic versification and prosaic remembrance. But there will be those who love these poems, and I can see why. They are faultless at what they do. They remind one of Alden Nowlan's poems, but have less humour. In fact, one poem ("Old Friends Meet") acknowledges that Sorestad and the late Nowlan are "kindred spirits." I like best the poems in the second section of the book, because they are less precious.

Last year, Roo Borson and I were judges for the Saskatchewan Writer's Guild poetry manuscript competition. One of the three entries that we chose was Gary Hyland's *After Atlantis*; as I recall, we praised it as having "technical virtuosity within a range of styles." I liked the manuscript better than I like this book, but then I'm judging it in a different context, and the published text has been modified. A long poem, which Roo and I singled out for praise, is missing, and a new poem calls Raymond Carver a "turd"! A dextrous confidence here seduces the reader while eluding risks. There are dialect poems, prose poems, philosophical poems, the "linesandline-sandlinesandlinesoflines" kinds of poem — just about everything.

I tell students that being really smart won't help them with poetry; how much you know is not as important as how attached you are to the little you do

know. But Hyland's a good poet with surprises to offer, and once again, I should add that his admirers are justified.

Patrick Friesen has shaken loose, as you can see: "sometimes you slip the tyranny of fear at night and the world shines beneath your feet sometimes you shake loose and gypsy's in your arms." Here he is even shaking loose of traditional poetic forms that rely on an isolated voice. *You Don't Get to Be a Saint* is composed of tumbling sequences of fragments of voices that have been done in collaboration with dancers, actors, visual artists, and singers. (One way out of poetry's limitations is to invite others in.) There is a radio piece about Richard Manuel, formerly of The Band. There are two dance-collaboration sections: interpretive movement mixed with memories, stories, and facts. Images of rain predominate.

This is a healthy endeavour: to expand and not repeat. Friesen knows that the wide spirit of the long line is justified only by honesty. This is the only book of these three that reads as if it hurts to say what it says; and it displays an adventurous moodiness and inclusiveness:

*this time van gogh gets to be born in  
greece  
athenian light across his eyes*

*emily dickinson vaults the midnight  
horse  
and gallops to her love*

*I'm a child in a northern tree  
still climbing at the sky  
("biography")*

Friesen, through his theatre and radio work, is opening poetry's windows for us. It can get stuffy in here, yes?



## ART VERSUS CIVILIZATION

by Stan Fogel

### CRONENBERG ON CRONENBERG

edited by Chris Rodley  
Knopf Canada/Random House. 224 pages. \$16 paper  
(ISBN 0 394 22270 9)

I'VE GOT the Cronenberg bug, or has the Cronenberg bug got me...and many others, spreading a sort of Cronenberg's disease from cinephile to cinephile? How else to explain why Cronenberg's queasy images are all the rage? After all, he's even "framed" that arch cut-up and conspiracy-finder, William Burroughs; and a damned fine job he did of it in *Naked Lunch* say I, and even the gaunt guy in the undersized hat.

Nonetheless, approaching *Cronenberg on Cronenberg* I was tempted to think the following: "too early" or "de trop" or "a Life" before his life has gone on especially long or (and this is surely paranoid, leaving me ripe to have a tiny, slimy Cronenberger slide into or out of my flesh) that people blithe in one medium are usually feckless in another. Well, a list of film directors one would like to encourage the publishers of this book (it's one in a series) not to publish is probably in order, but it wouldn't include *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*.

There are many reasons why the volume works. One is the playfulness of the book, which opens with a Nabokovian (Nabokov, along with Burroughs, is a fascination of Cronenberg's), or false, foreword; it's "author" fortunately sent this piece off before "his mysterious death by self-immolation." Then there is the format, which intersperses Cronenberg's musings with some pithy situating by Chris Rodley, the book's editor. *Cronenberg on Cronenberg* also contains a "filmography" that is both up-to-date and comprehensive.

Most valuable, though, are the interviews Rodley recorded with Cronenberg

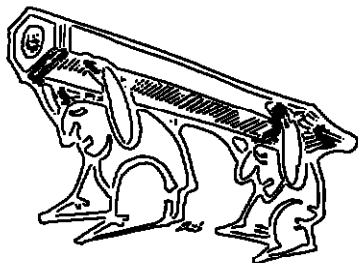
who, I note thankfully, sounds unlike an *auteur* with *hauteur*. Instead, Cronenberg comes across as a human and pensive sort whose candour about the often bewildering gestation of his often perverse films and willingness to articulate reasons for that perversity make his remarks more than jottings for fans or tidbits for academics.

Cronenberg normalizes the Byzantine world of movie deal-making and reveals the impositions on his art that budgetary constraints have made: the choice of Toronto apartment buildings as sets shaped scenes in some of his early films, for instance. In recent years, Toronto has had to double for Tangiers because of the Gulf crisis and the impossibility of securing insurance for *Naked Lunch* to be shot in North Africa.

Gossip, of course, is a good goad to read any book, and there's some of that here: Samantha Eggar saying, "*The Brood* was the strangest and most repulsive film I've ever done," and Jennifer O'Neill crying when she read the actual script of *Scanners* and realized that the producers had previously sent her a script with all the violence removed — because they thought she would have rejected the role if she'd known the film's contents.

Nonetheless, it's not the titillation, but rather Cronenberg's efforts to answer questions about his — to some — disturbing engagement with the demented and the extreme, sexually and otherwise, that are the attraction of *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*. His conclusions regarding the artistic versus the civilized and the political will not please everyone; they are, however, lucid and forthright.

Having moved from virus to verisimilitude, I'd like to leave the last word on his "place" to Cronenberg: "When people say, 'Great, another Cronenberg movie! Let's take everybody and have popcorn' — then I'll know I'm mainstream."



## SIDELONG AUTOBIOGRAPHY

by Virginia Beaton

### THE INVENTION OF TRUTH

by Elizabeth Brewster

Oberon, 138 pages, \$12.95 paper, \$25.95 cloth  
(ISBN 0 88750 869 3 cloth, 0 88750 870 7 paper)

ELIZABETH BREWSTER describes this book as a "sidelong autobiography." It's certainly not a conventional author's memoir; if your idea of a literary bio involves names, dates, anecdotes, and inside gossip, *The Invention of Truth* will be a disappointment. Here, instead of juicy comments about Canadian literati, are poems, some family photos, journal excerpts, and dreams. Quirky and rambling as it sometimes is, this book is less about a writer's life than it is about memory, and the way truth changes over a lifetime.

Brewster is the author of numerous books of poems and short stories, as well as several novels, *The Sisters* and *Junction* prominent among them. Born and raised in New Brunswick between the wars, she attended the University of New Brunswick, Radcliffe, the University of Toronto Library School, and Indiana University. She has won the E. J. Pratt award for poetry, and has taught at the University of Saskatchewan. Fragments and occasionally entire chunks of her own history sometimes float to the top of her work; for instance, much of *The Sisters* contains elements of Brewster's life, in that its protagonist, Jane Marchant, is also a quiet, bookish girl who rises from her rural New Brunswick background to study in Fredericton during the Second World War.

Despite Brewster's talent as a prose writer and poet, this book is oddly unsatisfying. Each section has a unity of theme — one is a collage of dreams and impressions of her father and another, "Clara Flagg's Journal," served as a frame for *The Sisters* — but the sections don't evolve into a coherent whole. Much of the writing is impres-



Elizabeth Brewster

sionistic rather than specific, and there are significant gaps in the chronology.

Brewster does write at some length and with obvious affection about her parents' personalities and their continued effect on her. "It's my way of coming to terms with them, perhaps," she writes. "Maybe my way of prolonging their existence, since I have no children." The section "Victorian Interlude" is particularly interesting as she mingles journal entries, dreams, and the Tarot in order to interpret memories and conversations with her parents.

Yet the result of this focus on her parents is that little is learned about Brewster in her adult years as an independent woman. The writer who recreates engaging scenes from girlhood — a child who read the Bible, Shakespeare, and the funnies with the same avidity — is oddly silent about her middle years. What's missing are the links between the child, the university student of 1942, and the woman who exists now. Between 1942 and "Clara Flagg's Journal" in 1972, events and dates are sparse, and aside from the mention of the two world wars, external references are few.

While biographical details aren't obligatory, the overall tone of *The Invention of Truth* — gentle, slightly bemused memories — rantalizes the reader because of what is left unsaid. Brewster's guiding ideas, emotions, and motives are at least as important as the bare facts of her life, but she has not yet written out her story.

## PATTERNS OF VIOLENCE

by Karl Jirgens

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### "FRONT LINES": THE FICTION OF TIMOTHY FINDLEY

by Lorraine York  
ECW, 147 pages, \$25 paper  
(ISBN 1 55022 101 9)

### MORAL METAFICTION

by Donna Pennee  
ECW, 120 pages, \$20 paper  
(ISBN 1 55022 138 8)

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IT IS NOT ENTIRELY fair to compare these two books. Both critics are accomplished in their own fields and have solid credentials. Lorraine York's book is at least partly inspired by an undergraduate course that she taught on Timothy Findley, and is aimed at creating a practical and detailed criticism of his fictions in relation to the idea of war as a male text. Donna Pennee's study is aimed at her peers, addresses a tendency in Findley's work towards historical revisionism, and enters into complex discussions of the ontological and epistemological ramifications of his fiction. In a way, the two books complement each other. York's serves as an introduction to patterns of violence in his novels and short stories while Pennee examines the implications of these patterns, and both authors address history and its relationship to Findley's writing. Both are using a critical approach that is feminine if not feminist, an approach that works well as a means of illuminating Findley's literary strategies.

Following up on Jonathan Culler's concept of intertextuality and Hayden White's views on history, York argues that "war, like historical discourse, is a text which may have structural affinities with other texts such as novels and stories." While she does deal briefly with Findley's revisionist posture towards dominant versions of history, York focuses on war, history, and the novel as forms of fiction. She identifies the sexual, familial, physical, and intellectual violence that is at the core of Findley's fiction,

and views his six novels and various short stories as a suite about violence — an "interlocking system of war fictions." Her view goes beyond that of earlier critics who saw Findley as the author of only two novels on war (*The Wars* and *Famous Last Words*). York's research is impressive: she quotes from Findley's personal papers at the national archives and consults a daunting list of sociological, political, and historical studies of the first and second world wars. If there is a weakness in "Front Lines" it is that York does not fully address the larger narratological and philosophical implications involved in Findley's fiction.

However, to be fair, only so much can be done in a book of this length, particularly when considering the entire body of Findley's writing. York's strength is her ability to illuminate Findley's *oeuvre* in terms of an all-encompassing pattern of violence.

In *Moral Metafiction*, Donna Pennee also deals with Findley's writing in terms of fiction as history and history as fiction. Pennee analyses his posture toward the formation of dominant modes of discourse, and the way that they tend to marginalize particular social groups. Her analysis takes into account politics, gender, sexuality, race, and class. She also deals with the role of the reader in (re)constructing the text. History, like fiction, requires interpretation, and, for Pennee, the reader is engaged in an interpretive choice that is both possible and morally necessary. However, Pennee explains that this reader-engagement is complicated by an epistemological question, since within the context of Findley's fictions, archival materials, photographs, letters, newspaper items, and other forms of documentation are shown to be either questionable or false. Pennee explains Findley's meta-fictional method and his tendency to bring so-called "authentic" sources of information into question as his means of challenging dominant ideologies. Like York, Pennee casts her critical eye across the body of Findley's writing; she reads his fictions intertextually and discusses their recurring motifs, narrative patterns, and conceptual schemes.

York's and Pennee's studies are intelligent analyses of Findley's textual strategies, and provide a powerful opening volume in book-length studies of his fictions.

## ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES

by Michael Coren

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### LAST TRAIN TO TORONTO: A CANADIAN RAIL ODYSSEY

by Terry Pindell  
Douglas & McIntyre, 380 pages, \$26.95 cloth  
(ISBN 0 00 215778 0)

### SKETCHES IN WINTER: A BEIJING POSTSCRIPT

by Charles Foran  
HarperCollins, 210 pages, \$24.95 cloth  
(ISBN 0 88894 741 0)

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LITERATURE is as much a victim of the petulant whims of fashion and fad as any other art form. Travel writing was considered difficult to sell for two decades, and gifted and jubilantly evocative travel writers had a wretched time of it in the '60s and early '70s. And then came the renaissance. Authors of the stature of Martha Gellhorn and Eric Newby brought the genre back into the mainstream, re-establishing the school of travel writing in its proper and esteemed place.

The form has two distinct manifestations: the Laodicean, apolitical volume, a delicious guide to faces, feelings, and facets of a place; and the political study, examining and interpreting the state of affairs and affairs of state in a particular country or region. The American railway addict Terry Pindell is an exponent of the Laodicean approach. Specifically, he writes about trains. Train addicts are usually a breed of which to be wary; dirty ski jackets and a wretched monomania. Not so with Pindell, however; in terse and sinewy prose he recounts his year of travelling across Canada on the railway system, which culminated in a trip on the final run of the eastbound Canadian from Vancouver to Toronto in January 1990:

I am not prepared for the sheer emotion of the gathering at the CN sta-

tion in Vancouver....As a visiting American I am struck by the lack of the slick, well-rehearsed demonstrations one sees so often in the United States when a special interest group is threatened by government action. But there is protest: it is homespun, individual, and personal. An old man carries a sign hanging by a string from a stick over his shoulder. He has scribbled his message in red and black felt-tip pens on a one-by-four-foot piece of one-inch styro-foam insulation.

The interwoven nature of Canadian history and the Canadian railway is captured poignantly in this volume. The train has played an integral part in Canada's political evolution, and is in many ways the quintessential symbol of national unity. Pindell used this romantic means of transport as a vehicle of discovery, travelling north to Canada's geographical limits, into Quebec, and through the Western heartlands. As an American he is attractively incredulous at the size and scope of Canada, at the very fact that such a disparate and often desperate land is a nation at all. His conclusions are sanguine, even optimistic. The old trains may be gone, but the spirit behind them is perennial.

Charles Foran's *Sketches in Winter* is the other sort of travel book, a sail through profoundly troubled waters. He was an English teacher at a Beijing college when the Tiananmen Square massacre took place. The appeal of this vibrant and successful book lies in its refusal to analyse contemporary China through the coal-black glasses of political history and Maoist rhetoric; instead Foran employs autobiography, memories, anecdotes, and pungent fragments of conversations with the Chinese people themselves. He also has a gift for direct and invigoratingly challenging writing:

I remember once trying to accommodate what, on the surface, seemed a generous concession by Chairman Mao Zedong....ninety-five percent of the population appreciated what the Party had done to end imperial-

ist depredations against China and supported the Party's main goals. Almost as an afterthought, Mao squared the equation by saying that only five percent of the population should be considered "bad elements." Only five percent! That's fifty million people, twice the population of Canada, and the principal justification for a whole network of cruel "labour-reform" camps.... The statistic comes straight from hell.

Foran has an intimate knowledge of the denizens and *dramatis personae* of Beijing University, which was the epicentre of intellectual life in China and at the heart of what occurred in Tiananmen Square. He brings this knowledge, and marvellous empathy, to bear on his examination of what happened during the protests and on his interviews with Chinese students and teachers. A flavour of this literary journey that remains in the mouth long after consumption is that just as with many of those who were formerly citizens of the Soviet Union, the new Chinese generation has aspirations, fears, and hopes that would not be out of place in Winnipeg or Wyoming. There is such a thing as the human spirit, and human ambition, and they know no national, economic, or racial boundaries. In reminding us of that, Charles Foran has done a valuable thing indeed.



## LIFE LIVED EVERY DAY

by Merilyn Simonds Mohr

### NO BURDEN TO CARRY: NARRATIVES OF BLACK WORKING WOMEN IN ONTARIO 1920s TO 1950s

edited by Dionne Brand  
Women's Press, 289 pages, \$17.95 paper  
(ISBN 088961 163 7)

THIS BOOK is part of the relatively new subgenre of oral history. Subtitled *Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario 1920s to 1950s*, it is a collection of taped interviews with 15 elderly black women who ruminate on Canadian life over the last eight decades. Reading it is like spending an afternoon with a roomful of charming, strong, witty women who have a lifetime of stories to share.

"I had to go in and see a coloured family, and I had forgotten where the coloured family lived," recalls Bertha McAleer, a pastor's daughter born in Amherstburg, Ontario, in 1909.

So I seen a little boy come along, and I said to the little boy, "You know where the coloured family is?" He said to me, "What colour?" I thought: Isn't that strange? And it just dawned on me: I guess he's not used to that. I said, "Brown," and he said, "Oh yes, they live right down there."

The interviewers, including Dionne Brand, who writes an impassioned, intelligent introduction, guided their subjects with a list of 30 questions, aimed at discovering what their lives have been like. Some of the answers are surprising.

"We knew that we were Black," says Viola Aylestock, 82,

but it was never emphasized. When this Black thing took over, I'm telling you, we older people, we laughed — so what? We know we're Black, why emphasize it so? But, of course, you

must have an identity. I can remember a friend of mind — her grandchildren, they had to have the Afro hairdo and everything. "Grandma, you just don't understand." And Grandma says, "Well, I do understand! I've been Black all my life. Why wouldn't I understand?" Oh Lord. And they got Black is Beautiful — well Brown is Beautiful too.

The colour bar, it turns out, crosses a multitude of hues. Bee Allen's uncle drove a streetcar in Toronto in 1924:

He was there because they didn't know he was Black. He didn't look Black — he was totally white in appearance. And my brother, he went through the white army when they were not sending coloured soldiers with white soldiers.

Some of the women deny they met with discrimination — as women or as Blacks — while others responded to it with quiet rebellion. June Robbins, 79, recalls a large dinner party planned by a prominent Chatham doctor and his wife:

They come out and got a whole bunch of us girls. We all went there, and when we had gotten there, these little boys — they wouldn't be very old — she wanted us to call them master like they do down south — slavery. We all decided we're going to wait right till near supper time for them to sit down at the table. We all got up and walked out, just left.

"Black women have in some ways always been liberated," says Gwen Johnston, 77,

We've had to be. We've had to go out there and help our men bring in the bread, and if there wasn't a man we'd have to bring in the bread on our own. I think that we have to be very, very careful about getting separated from the Black men. Black men and Black women have to get closer together, work out their problems, and sometimes women's liberation gets in the way — women's liberation as defined by white women.

Individual stories may rankle or delight, but there is no single, simple "truth" to be drawn from an oral history such as this. What *No Burden to Carry* does, so admirably and so necessarily, is to bring into high relief the terrain of everyday life — of Blacks, of women, of all Canadians. This, too, is history.

## NOT SO FREE ENTERPRISE

by Sheri South

### THE NEW BUREAUCRACY: WASTE AND FOLLY IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR

by Herschel Hardin  
McClelland & Stewart, 384 pages, \$29.95 cloth  
(ISBN 0 7710 3914 X)

THIS BOOK takes a long, hard look at the private sector's spending habits. The "new bureaucracy," Newspeak for the free-enterprise system, is criticized for being exactly like the "old" bureaucracy (a.k.a. the government) that it often upbraids for wasting public funds. Herschel Hardin argues that large corporations are just as guilty, if not more so, of wasting resources that could be better deployed elsewhere.

His look at corporate bureaucracy reveals that there is little relationship between stockholder return and the comforts of six-figure executive salaries that include such perks as stock options, chauffeurs, and clothing allowances. Hardin makes a strong case for full disclosure of executive pay, to help shareholders make informed investment decisions. Those corporate sharks and raiders who make Ivan Boesky's motto "greed is good" their credo are charged with paper entrepreneurialism: they may orchestrate leveraged buy-outs (LBOs), spectacular mergers and acquisitions, but they don't develop and market new products and technology or increase productivity. Takeover games do little more than generate mega profits for the key players and prop up the stock market through the movement of huge blocks of shares.

The market is, as one analyst wrote, "a

practical means of making money for those with no special talent for anything else." Trading doesn't produce anything directly, other than make-work. Initially stocks may have been sold to raise new capital, but no funds go into the company treasury when people buy and sell those shares on the stock exchange. Similarly, the commodity and foreign-currency exchanges are part of an "ultimate crap game" that doesn't "do" anything productive. Institutional investors and financial counsellors feed off stock-market inflation, creating their own bureaucracy through newsletters and exorbitant fees.

Even sports, the arts, and advertising are not immune, according to Hardin.

Companies attach their names to existing sports events, or try to target an audience by concocting their own events. The large salaries garnered by professional athletes and celebrities, and the extra layer of endorsement income that comes from wearing logos and pushing products, increase costs to the public.

But if it is true that money is wasted by the private sector on sybaritic pleasures, this observation is hardly new. *The New Bureaucracy* does supply the reader with an undifferentiated, albeit interesting, succession of examples supporting Hardin's contention that "free-enterprise ideology is the last refuge of wasteful bureaucracies," but it is one without development or substantial analysis. His tone, which verges on the envious rather than the analytical, makes for tiresome reading in his considerations of corporate spending.

What's more, his comparison of government waste and extravagant corporate expenditures is flawed. The reason that government spending is so closely scrutinized is that the funds used to support the public sector are obtained through compulsory taxation. Taxes, like death, are inevitable; but no one has to invest in the stock market if they don't want to.



## FICTION

CANADIAN FICTION in the 1950s was hardly teeming with feisty female characters — especially those of Ukrainian origin. Due to her singular personality, Lilli Landash, the heroine of Vera Lysenko's 1954 novel *Yellow Boots*, should be well known to Canadian readers. Alas, the past 38 years have not conferred on Lilli the fictional status granted either Hagar Shipley or Del Jordan. Therefore the republication of *Yellow Boots* (NeWest, 355 pages, \$14.95 paper) is timely: it coincides with the centenary of Ukrainian settlement in Western Canada, and it introduces Lilli — and her creator — to a whole new generation of readers.

Vera Lysenko (1910-1975) was born in north Winnipeg and following the completion of her B.A. at the University of Manitoba in 1930, went on to become a journalist and social activist. Her first book, *Men in Sheepskin Coats: A Study of Assimilation* (1947) was the first English-language history of Ukrainians in Canada written by an "insider."

Unfortunately, a similar preponderance of documentary minutiae tends to stifle the vitality of *Yellow Boots*. Although Lilli is a charming character possessed of a winsome spirit, Lysenko's narration stumbles under the burden of excess detail about Ukrainian-Canadian Prairie life. Perhaps Lysenko's recitation of customs and rituals is an attempt to combat the marginal status forced upon her culture during the first 50 years of this century, when the "Anglo presence," to cite a phrase from Alexandra Kryvoruchka's introduction, was so predominant in Canadian literature.

Nevertheless, despite Lysenko's sometimes unwieldy prose, readers cannot help responding to Lilli's growth from a sickly, overworked farm girl, whose insensitive father is blind to her promise, to a delightfully original folk singer. Call this a pre-feminist novel with a multicultural twist.

LYNNE VAN LUVEN

DR. ROBERT SNOW, the protagonist of *Double Blind* (Macmillan, 256 pages, \$24.95 cloth), is 45 years old, 18 months sober, and "five months, three weeks and two days, but who's counting?" away from — maybe — regaining his general licence to practise medicine. To pay his alimony and keep out of bars, the "specially licenced ex-lush" does weekend call duty at the Maryland State psychiatric facility. When he notices an influx of unusual patients — HIV-positive homosexual men who, while unaccountably healthy physically, show signs of sudden and severe psychosis — he figures that a ground-breaking publication on this anomaly couldn't hurt his chances with the licensing board. However, he soon discovers that his little research project has antagonized some dangerous people, and put his own sanity at risk.

David Laing Dawson, a clinical psychiatrist and author of one previous thriller, *Last Rights*, has created an authentically nightmarish atmosphere and a believable, if not always lovable, hero. Snow's struggle to stay sober as he searches for the source of the bizarre epidemic, while simultaneously facing the respective terrors of hetero- and homosexual courtship in the '90s, is well told. Less convincing is the portrayal of a gay physician, whose sybaritic bathroom, Russian Blue cat, collections of Lalique, Royal Doulton, and "Canadian pictures...Cranstons," not to mention his sexual proselytizing, are all a bit too much. Unfortunately, the opposite can be said of the plot: there just isn't enough of it to support the series of well-written Hitchcockian set pieces (a friendly squash game turns suddenly vicious; the hero impulsively leaves his own prints on a possible murder weapon, etc.) that keep the narrative trundling along. The dénouement, which relies on a *deus ex* laboratory involving "recombinant DNA" (what else?) is unsatisfying, and to me makes a brutal sexual assault that occurs earlier in the book seem, in retrospect, not only gratuitous but illogical.

ANNE DENOON

D. F. BAILEY has produced a novel for the self-help generation; childhood trauma, guilt motivation, parental alcoholism, the dysfunctional family — *Healing the Dead* (Douglas & McIntyre, 200 pages, \$16.95 paper) covers all the catchy crises. In this, his second novel, Bailey struggles to rise above pop psychoanalysis into meaningful spiritual comment; but although the story itself is compelling, it is hampered by bland, clichéd dialogue and a melodramatic narrative.

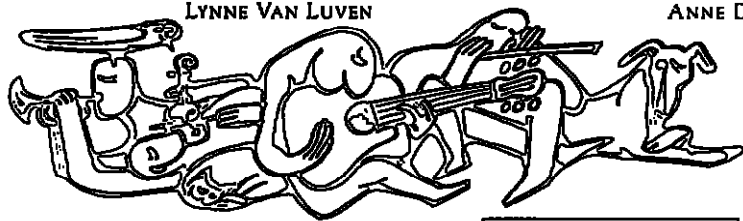
The plot follows the lives of the three Sykes children (Jayne, David, and Rose) as they grow through childhood and early adolescence in Toronto, and into adulthood in New York City. Initially a quite typical, middle-class family, the Sykeses experience an unpleasant episode that threatens to emotionally cripple them for generations to come. While playing "mob" in their Toronto basement, with what she assumes is a toy revolver, young Rose fatally shoots a neighbourhood boy. For the Sykes family, the result of this violence is a cloud of guilt and denial, which takes the rest of the novel and some serious "working through" to dissipate.

Unfortunately, Bailey seems to have no more than a surface understanding of his characters. Explained rather than developed, they impress as marionettes who are manipulated to illustrate a tale of emotional resurrection that never comes to life.

JOHN DEGEN

BEFORE writing a play, Anton Chekhov used to write detailed profiles of his characters. Then he would throw the profiles away and begin. Barbara Sapergia has a talent for imagining lives, particularly the lives of girls and women, but the stories in *South Hill Girls* (Fifth House, 167 pages, \$12.95 paper) often seem like mere profiles: overly detailed, giving equal weight to trivial and significant events, unfolding with little sense of dramatic structure.

Most of these stories are set in South Hill, a working-class neighbourhood in a prairie town. "Matty and Rose," one of the more shapely inclusions, is a nostalgic remembrance of the time a Black man moved into the neighbourhood. Most of the other stories are told by women musing privately about their



lives. Their voices are methodical and articulate, and their emotions seem real if a little simple. But the stories are without tension and never surprising.

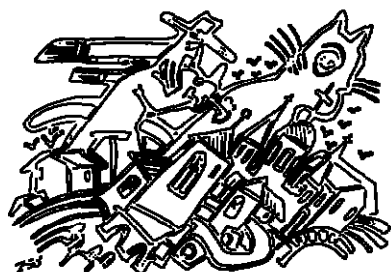
Sapergia follows her related characters over three decades; a daughter in one story may be a mother herself in another. But the effect of these connections is merely to string the stories together, rather than to move them towards the complexity of a novel. *South Hill Girls* reads more like a series of promising notes than a finished book.

CARY FAGAN

BROWSING THROUGH the average Canadian garden, one doesn't find too many black tulips. And in the CanLit plot, you won't find too many Bruce Easons, either. *Black Tulips* (Turnstone, 149 pages, \$16.95 paper) is a bleak but compelling first book of short stories. Eason, a former Montrealer now living in Winnipeg, does not craft bloodless, carefully academic fiction. Instead, Eason's characters are sweatily, grittily real; their world is seen through a blackly humorous glass. They are also, as is Grandma in the story "Country Quirks," unreliable in a sinister sort of way. Does Grandma really bash Grandpa over the head with her cast-iron frying pan? Eason insinuates that she does, then suggests she doesn't — and leaves the reader in the same confused doubt that haunts the grandchildren Norman Todd and Joy Joy.

Despite their determinedly mundane realism, there's also something slightly surreal and askew about all of Eason's stories, some of which are really only vignettes. You read them quickly, and then they hang around in your head to haunt you for days. I'm not sure I really liked any of Eason's tales — but I couldn't ignore a one of them. Watch for bigger things from this writer.

LYNNE VAN LUVEN



I DELVED into Michael Mirolla's *The Formal Logic of Emotion* (Nuage Editions, 191 pages, \$13.95 paper) with considerable gusto; both the cover illustration and the story titles were intriguing. But despite the best use of a T. S. Eliot quote since Susan Cheever's *Looking for Work*, the book was disappointing.

Perhaps Mirolla's years of toil for Montreal's trash tabloids have affected his natural warmth of spirit, for his clever and witty constructs reveal a disturbing lack of authorial empathy. The characters enact their creator's fantasies with a chill, facile precision; the moment they have outlasted their usefulness they are returned, without ceremony or sympathy, to the void from which they were advanced. Only their usefulness as pawns in philosophical dilemmas (e.g. Being versus Non-Being) is explored; they are not allowed to develop any emotional or spiritual resonance, for that always upsets the apple-cart.

But lo, there is hope: "The Truth-Tree Method" opens with a dashing display of genuine lyric intensity, mercifully free of the intellectual posturing so readily deployed elsewhere. Sadly, it peters out into a somewhat predictable postmodernism, where the hero, refusing further orders, wanders off naked to embrace his demise in a snowbound forest.

Mirolla's obvious antecedents are Kafka and Borges; fans of these two masters will perhaps be thrilled. I was, I'm afraid, only sporadically impressed. I longed to be touched in Yeats's "deep heart's core"; for the most part, the longing remains.

GORDON PHINN

EVEN WHEN I was a pig-tailed, Mennonite tomboy in feed-sack skirts I knew the mysteries of the Word were best packaged in black, zippered leather: I desperately wanted a zipper Bible. After reading Armin Wiebe's *Murder in Gutenthal* (Turnstone, 279 pages, \$12.95 paper), I figure maybe it's a good thing I never got one. Cornelius Bergen, a.k.a. Schneppa Kjnals, a parochial "Pee-Eye" who has taken crash courses in sleuthing via correspondence, lazes in his job like the hammock it is. Being a private investigator in the Mennonite rural border-town of Gutenthal does not scratch his

diploma's veneer; he is simply a good neighbour — for a fee. That is, until literally undercover commerce in zipper Bibles involves him in intrigue. Suddenly, Kjnals finds that unzipping scripture is twice as dangerous as peeling back a fig leaf: this bumbling, milquetoast gumshoe is jolted into the higher hermeneutics of verses portentously underlined, baggies of cocaine, tens of thousands of dollars, and old photos suggesting that pacifist community members had Nazi affiliations.

If Kjnals weren't so beduzzed by hormones, solving this complex tangle might proceed more quickly. But it only takes tight jeans and the slippage of a bra strap to skew Kjnals's cunning. Within the easy banter of folksy hilarity, Wiebe strews his clues with alacrity until they are about as soluble as the agglomerate of his characters' names on the reader's tongue. Beitelkopp Blatz, Schmuggle Veens, Rosmack Rampel, and Holzyebock Hiebat are as tenacious in the mouth as the January molasses in Mama's shoofly pie. This mix scrambles clarity, sometimes to comic advantage, at others to the disadvantage of the tale's intelligibility.

Kjnals makes it through to "revelations" by the seat of his pants: a shot in the ass brings apocalyptic visitors to his hospital bedside. Wisely, Wiebe leaves enough loose ends dangling so that his hero is not budged from the comic integrity of his befuddlement. After all, Kjnals reminds us, "I am Schneppa Kjnals. I am everywhere. I am the eyes at the back of your head. I see the world in a stepped-in cowpie. I am a good neighbour for a fee."

ELIZABETH ANTHONY

A RECENT collection of poetry and stories offers glimpses of a Dutch presence in Western Canada. *Buffaloberries and Saskatoons* (Netherlandic, 90 pages, \$9.95 paper), the sixth in a series of anthologies, contains the work of six writers. The anthologies, according to the editor Hendrika Ruger, attempt to redress the "noticeable absence of work by Dutch-Canadians in the literature of immigrant writers of Canada."

The writing ranges from the pioneer experiences of Jane Abersson, who from 1929 to 1973 wrote about her Canadian adventures for Dutch newspapers, to the

wildlife observations of Dick Kekker, who emigrated to Canada in 1959 and settled in Edmonton. This attractive volume also includes the poetry of Alice Van Wart, who lived in Alberta and British Columbia for several years before moving to Toronto, and the Manitoban Sarah Klassen, whose poetry reflects her Prairie farm background; and prose by Aritha van Herk, best known for such novels as *No Fixed Address* and *The Tent Peg*, and Pleuke Boyce, a poet, short-story writer, and translator.

Each piece of work in this eclectic assortment is written with the attention to craft and detail you would expect of the stereotypically meticulous Dutch: Dekker's description of his sighting of wolves in "Song of the North" is as good as anything of the type written by Farley Mowat and Aberson's "A House Party in Canada" reads like something Susanna Moodie might have written had she been less judgemental. Of the poetry, Van Wart's "The Loon Poem" is eerily beautiful, and Klassen's "Interlake Childhood" series is haunted by the ghosts of countless immigrant farmers.

LYNNE VAN LUVEN

## NON-FICTION

The fact that we have to talk about it means that a lot of people don't want to hear it. And as soon as there's something they don't want to hear, it's very important that we say it.

THUS JEWELLE L. GOMEZ in an essay co-written with Barbara Smith, "Taking the Home out of Homophobia: Black Lesbian Health," one of many contributions to *Piece of My Heart: A Lesbian of Colour Anthology* (Sister Vision, 393 pages, \$1995 paper), edited by Makeda Silvera. The "it" to which Gomez refers is, of course, lesbianism, and the "they" she mentions is the majority, moral or not. As the subtitle indicates, this collection of poetry and prose is about more than being a woman-loving, woman-identified woman. It is about being a woman of colour and a woman who loves women,

something all of the contributors to this anthology are proud of, but which they have all been made to feel ashamed of at one time or another. A large number of vibrant, creative women writers are represented here, some of whom — such as Audre Lorde — are well known, but there are also talented new authors such as Christina Springer, Nice Rodriguez, and Kit Yee Chan.

As a white lesbian, I could relate to these women's words and worlds in many ways: women-loving women are an often misunderstood group of people. To be a woman of colour and to love women must be even more alienating, and can often be (as is pointed out) more frightening than being a white lesbian or a straight woman of colour. I wasn't able to relate wholeheartedly to these women, but I was able to listen, recognize, and understand their situation.

There is a great deal of pride in this book: as Raymina Mays writes, "Tell them there are two things that I'm going to love being for the rest of my life: queer and black." *Piece of My Heart* is a piece of hope, a piece of truth, and a fine collection of work from a part of our society that is too often shunned and too little praised.

GRETCHEN ZIMMERMAN

IS BEING left-handed injurious to your health? Well, it can be, according to Stanley Coren, a psychology professor at the University of British Columbia and the author of *The Left-Hander Syndrome* (Maxwell Macmillan, 375 pages, \$2995 cloth). Coren reports that there are two main reasons for lefties to fear for their lives — accidents and disease. Because this is a right-handed world (only roughly 10 to 15 per cent of us are left-handed), left-handed people must contend with machines and tools designed for the right-handed. Consequently, they suffer more injuries than right-handed people, particularly in accidents relating to driving. Lefties are also more likely to die of disease because of poorer immune systems and a propensity for inheriting certain maladies, including diabetes and allergies, that righties don't suffer from as frequently or as seriously. Coren analyzes these issues in some detail, using a barrage of statistical studies to support his claims.

But despite the depressing message, the

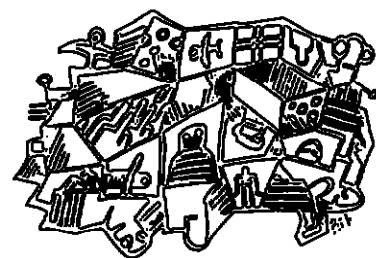
book is a pleasant combination of science, history, and self-help. Coren records the many linguistic slurs against lefties and the biased stereotypes that have traditionally depicted them as incompetent, immoral, or even evil. The science in the book not only provides a careful study of what makes left-handers different, but also asks the correct questions needed to elicit a true picture of life on the left. The self-help theme will be a welcome one for those lefties who are sometimes confused, often without realizing it, by everyday implements such as power tools and kitchen gadgets.

Behind all this is a plea for acceptance of the left-handed minority, which should be manifested. Coren says, in more sensitive design and more research into the problems that plague left-handed people. Coren argues that tolerance and appropriate design will more likely come about if left-handers themselves take part in educating the rest of the world about their problems.

MARTIN DOWDING

A NOTIONAL but important line separates Canada from its hulking neighbour to the south. *Borderlands: Essays in Canadian-American Relations* (ECW, 328 pages, \$45 paper), edited by Robert Lecker, contains a collection of essays that considers how this boundary affects those on either side of it. *Borderlands* study is inherently multi-disciplinary, including in its compass history, economics, sociology, political science, and the arts.

Several of the 14 essays collected here will be of interest only to the specialist, for example Thomas McClraith's description of transportation systems in the borderlands from the late 18th to the early 20th centuries, Peter Meserve's discussion of provincial and state responses to boundary water controversies, and Laurence Seidenberg's treatise on recent negotiations between Canada and the United States regarding the theft of American television signals by Canadian cable tele-





vision broadcasters (easily the least penetrable study in the book). There is, however, much here to interest the general reader. Notable are a historical analysis by Mildred Schwartz of socialistic movements among farmers on both sides of the border, and a study by Sherrill Grace entitled "Comparing Mythologies: Ideas of West and North."

Although Victor Konrad's capable introduction serves to unify this varied collection, nowhere did I find a definition of what constitutes the "borderlands." Several of the essays are in fact comparative studies with only passing reference to the Canada-US border. Many of the contributors, however, do use the concept of the borderlands as the starting point for a vigorous analysis of the Canadian-American relationship. In the words of Sherrill Grace, "the study of borderlands can certainly show us what we share, how we came to share it, and why."

ANNE GIARDINI

THE COLLECTION of essays *Video the Changing World* (Black Rose, 228 pages, \$37.95 cloth, \$18.95 paper), edited by Nancy Thede and Alain Ambrosi, looks primarily at the uses of video by Third World communities and organizations: their reasons for using the technology, the debates and problems that have arisen, and their attempts to democratize video and television technology.

There seems to be something about video that makes people write in labyrinthine postmodern jargon, and *Video the Changing World* is unfortunately no exception; it is necessary to wade through an awful lot of academic verbiage to get to the little hard nuggets of actual experience. Most of the contributors, in fact, are First World academics and "development" workers. But the concrete experiences that do get related are interesting and valuable.

Debbie Brisebois's account of the creation of Inuit television in northern Canada, and this project's subsequent sabotage by the federal government, is important reading, and the several accounts of hands-on workshops in Africa and Latin America are interesting, though sketchy; again, we hear more about the theories being illustrated than about what really happened or what was really produced.

*Video the Changing World* is probably of limited interest to the general reader, but those who work with video — and especially those trying to use video in community-development projects — will find it useful.

MAGGIE HELWIG

MOST READERS will approach Christopher Ondaatje's *The Man-Eater of Punai* (HarperCollins, 208 pages, \$35 cloth) hoping for some hint about the impulses behind the author's notoriously mercurial career. As John Fraser says in his introduction, "Christopher Ondaatje is an officially controversial person." The book is an account of Ondaatje's return to Sri Lanka to sate his curiosity about a man-eating leopard, a much-storied monster that had haunted his childhood. The journey was also Ondaatje's attempt to confront another demon — his father's strange self-destruction.

As such, it is understandably a self-besotted book in which the author views the minutiae of the past and the trivia of the present as vastly important elements in his journey. Ondaatje recalls his boyhood in Sri Lanka and his school days in England with a frankness that is unnerving and faintly risible. He was a "fag" (a servant to older boys) in his public school and, he claims, a fine cricketer. His father was a laconic man with a sharp temper who eventually became unstable. The civil war that rages in Sri Lanka as the author ambles through it remains nothing more than an irritating background noise. These are the truths we glean from the text and the earnest captions to the tourist-type photographs.

A climax of sorts is reached when Ondaatje arrives at the place where the man-eater was finally shot. It is also at this point that he reveals the truth he has learned about his father's rapid decline. The problem for the reader is that Ondaatje invests this climax with a great deal more seriousness than it warrants. In fact the entire book, utterly lacking in irony or wit, gives greater weight to the author's inner turmoil than it possesses. A cynic can only conclude "so what?"

JOHN DOYLE

RAINER MARIA RILKE's paean to Orpheus, written in 1923, celebrated the transformative power intrinsic in the image of this tragic yet transcending god: "Hail the spirit that may unite us / for verily in images we live." The way of image Rilke honoured was not our way of festooning our leisure with the ready-mades of celluloid entertainment or buying into slick visual enticements to consumerism. Rather it was one of "poiesis," less a concept than a living process, as explored by Stephen K. Levine in *Poiesis: The Language of Psychology and the Speech of the Soul* (Palmerston Press, 135 pages, \$12.95 paper), a slim, moving volume of his own essays and poetry.

A professor at York University in Toronto and one of the inaugurators of ISIS-Canada, a training program in expressive-arts therapy, Levine defines poiesis as an integrating, transformative activity we can engage in through creative, "embodied thinking," using the human imaginative capacity not to abolish, but to transmute the suffering of the soul into the wine of nourishing meaning. In this context, the expressive arts (visual, music, drama, movement, and writing) are not about aesthetics, but rather envisioning and creating adequate — and sometimes eloquent — containers for our anguish that enable us to "imagine ourselves more deeply," and finally joyfully project our possibilities into life.

Levine shows how arts therapies relate to Western philosophical, sociological, and psychological theories and have their roots in shamanic practice. And there are doors in his work through which readers from all walks of life can enter, not just academicians or therapists. Levine accomplishes an integrated, whole, and movingly human work by progressing quite seamlessly — considering that this book is a quilt of separate pieces — into an unobtrusive demonstration of the power of poiesis.

ELIZABETH ANTHONY





## Moving Parts

by PHIL HALL

WHEN I SPEAK, or think of speaking, now I can hear my mind speaking it right after!" This is my three-year-old daughter, Brett, telling me something amazing. Here's the rest of the conversation, starting with my reply:

"Good, you can hear yourself think."

(Long pause, as her thinking speaks to her.)

"But only girls' minds speak."

"Oh...what do boys' minds do?"

"Nothing. They just think."

I tell you this to open our casual chat about eight new children's books because Brett's distinction between thinking and speaking is a useful one, perhaps, for judging such publications as these. (Her notion of gender distinctions with regard to thinking...well...I'll "think" about that elsewhere — presumably without "speaking" to myself.)

This speaking/thinking conversation reminds me of how "a spoonful of sugar" was supposed to "help the medicine go down" — "thinking" being the medicine, and "speaking" being the sugar. The trouble is that each decade's children end up having to open their mouths for new medicines as well as new sweeteners. True consistency resides only in the use of language itself. No matter how much thought goes into speaking of current social concerns, children love or dismiss stories based on how they sound, how they look.

For these reasons, I choose three favourites from the pile of books in front of me. A merging of visual and textual vibrancy, and an absence of sweeteners or preachings, has caused these three to rise to the surface almost on their own.

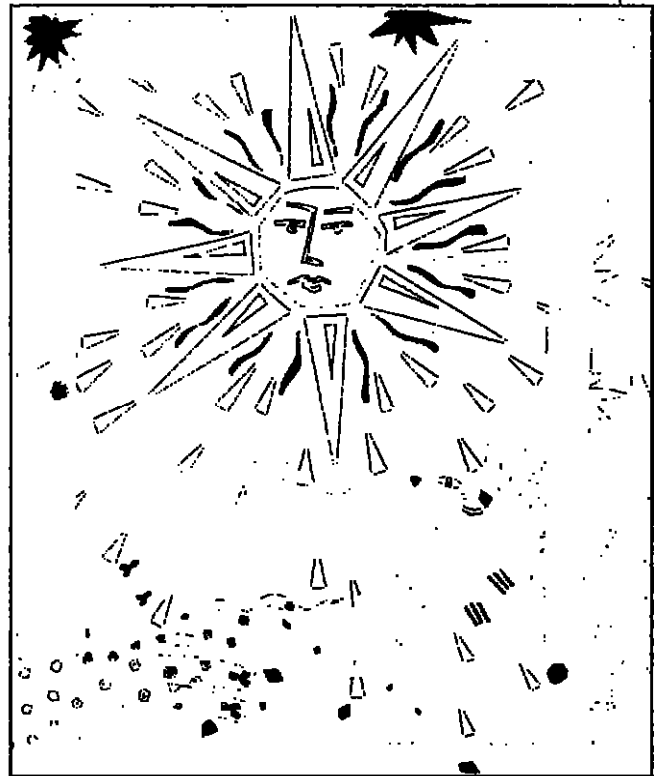
*How the Animals Got Their Colors* (Lester Publishing, 48 pages, \$18.95 cloth), by Michael Rosen, has only one thing wrong with it: notice the price. Although this book is for ages six and up, it

is so beautifully designed, John Clementson's illustrations are so vibrant, and the nine stories so irreverent and primal that a parent who pays \$18.95 will probably want to keep it on her own shelves. It even has a dust-jacket that mirrors its shiny boards underneath.

This said, I admire the book enough to have ignored the promotional guidance as to age level, and have begun to read one story each Friday morning to Brett and her nursery friends when I do my Participating Parent stint. We've begun a mural on which, after they hear a story, they draw the animals and give them their colours.

Coyote, that "Mr. Wiseguy" who loves to eat goose, has thrown his eyes into the river, only to have them stolen by geese. Now he has yellow eyes forever because he had to put cactus flowers into his empty sockets. Otherwise, how would he ever find those laughing geese? The next week, country people get turned into frogs because they won't share their pond-water with an incognito goddess. (How many green crayons can I find?)

Freda Ahenakew and H. C. Wolfart have edited and translated *wanisinwak iskweisak/Two Little Girls Lost in the Bush — A Cree Story for Children* (Fifth House, 40 pages, \$14.95 cloth), as told by Nehiyaw/Glecia Bear and illustrated by Jerry Whitehead. The preface states that this story is part of "a larger collection of



From *How the Animals Got Their Colors*

women's life experiences to be published in Cree with an English translation, under the title *kohkominauwak otacimowini-wawa/Our Grandmothers' Lives, As Told in Their Own Words*.

This book deserves to be quoted for its rich, repetitive, enthusiastic rhythms of recorded speech — and for how these have been preserved in translation:

As we were waking up, oh, my little sister had badly swollen feet since she had cut herself. And in the old days, of course, all you had to wear was flour-sacking — slips made from that kind, and brassiere for your breasts was also made from that kind, from flour-sacks, that kind was all you had to wear. Then I said to my little sister,

"I will take off my slip and bind your feet with it," I said to her. And so I took off my slip and tore it in half and then wrapped her feet up with it.

Such repetition, coming right from the mouth as it does, seems to me to be one of the great strengths of the oral traditions when they are used in children's literature. Considering how children love refrains, such dialogue as the above seems to offer them the pleasures of repetition in a crystalline, yet fundamental form.

I wishfully think that, with such dual texts as these, a small cassette with Cree on one side and English on the other would be a good idea.

My third favourite is Martyn Godfrey's *Is It OK If This Monster Stays for Lunch?* (Oxford, 32 pages, \$7.95 paper), with illustrations by Susan Wilkinson. I've also taken this one to nursery school and tried it out: the unabashed, wonky alliteration of the text was a big hit. Listen for yourselves:

Tammy was terribly tiny and wore a torn, tattered, too-right T-shirt. She had a black boot with a buckle on one foot and a blue boot with a bell on the other. She kept a slimy slug named Sloopy in the pocket of her purple, polka-dot pants.

The young girl in this story brings a wild weirdo home for lunch every day of the week, only to be told by each of the members in her family that trolls, gremlins, dinosaurs, space creatures, and monsters may definitely not stay for lunch. When, on Sunday, she meets Michael, a boy with dark skin, and also invites him home for lunch, her family says sure. Why Michael but not the various weirdos? Read and see.

Because this book deals with racism, it does belong in the "thinking" category, the "medicine" category. But its exuberant word-dance, and its tangential, almost unstated way of getting its point across, is a lot more fun than it is "sweet" or preachy.

Hugh MacDonald's *Chung Lee Loves Lobster* (Annick, unpaginated, \$14.95 cloth, \$4.95 paper), illustrated by Johnny Wales, is the story of two boys who follow an old man to the harbour in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, to

find out what he does each month with the single live lobster he buys. Everything leads to this one noble, if uncoated, pill:

All the time my family was growing, I worked in the restaurant cooking lobsters. I had to put lobsters into very hot water and give them pain. When I stopped work I wanted to do something to restore some of the good I had taken away. So every month I buy one lobster and give it its life to please the spirits of its ancestors that I have hurt.

*Aunt Fred Is a Witch* (Second Story, unpaginated, \$5.95 paper), by Rachna Gilmore, may be useful as a debunking device because, as its title indicates, it has some fun tackling that old pointy-hat-and-broomstick caricature that so blinds our children to a history of appalling violence by church and state against women healers and eccentrics. But, hey, this is a funny book, and Chum McLeod's illustrations are stylized action shots at tilted angles with bent door-frames and lots of red.

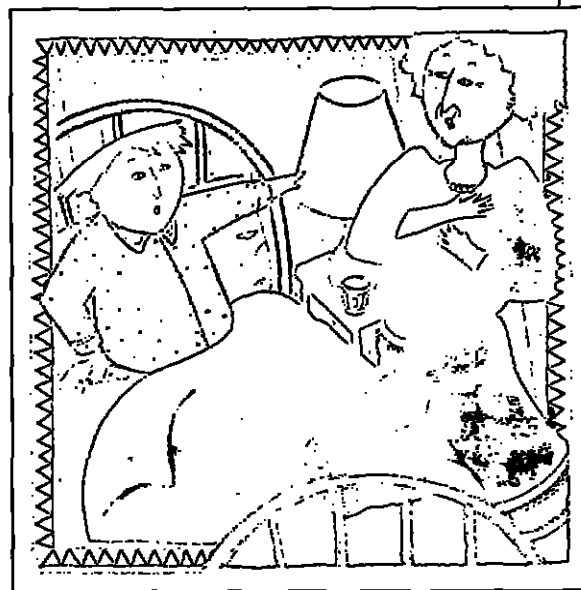
Aunt Fred has red hair, and "witch" is actually an acronym of her full name: Winifred Inez Tara Chowdry Hogarth! A necklace of garlic can't protect Fred's niece, Leila, from her aunt's infectious capacity for fun. As Fred says, "I get so tired of people telling me to act my age, don't you?"

The only message Jarina Marton wants to pass along in *Amelia's Celebration* (Annick, unpaginated, \$15.95 cloth, \$5.95 paper) is actually a suggestion that all children are old enough to stay up for celebrations. Amelia can't sleep because her parents are having a dance party under coloured lanterns in her backyard, so she gets out of bed, swings and dances by herself, and eventually falls asleep on the grass. Her parents are so relieved when they find her. Next time there's a party, she can stay up.

Once in *A Blue Moon* (Oxford, 32 pages, \$7.95 paper), by Nicola Morgan, is just good old nonsense and fun. The story of Aunt Floydie is told by way of figurative

expressions that are interpreted literally in the artwork. Aunt Floydie has a green thumb. She turns blue when she's blue and plays a fiddle when she's fit as a fiddle. Her friends, slipping into the night, are seen sliding precariously off the page. The big-featured, absurd illustrations are the main attraction, and kids will enjoy the discrepancy between what "living high off the hog" actually means compared with how it is represented.

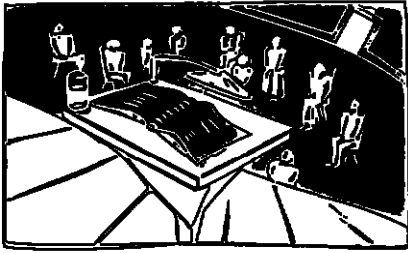
"Talking" and "thinking" unite in a pragmatic way, I suppose, in *My First 100 French Words* (McClelland & Stewart, unpaginated, \$12.95 cloth). This is a sturdy "pull-the-tab word book" in which a full-page scene of a park or a home is faced by a page of items from the larger picture. Pull the tab at the bottom, and the words under the pictures change from English to French. The book has no author, no



From *Aunt Fred Is a Witch*

humour, and the full-page scenes would perhaps be more interesting if they had small narrative elements drawn into them. As always with books that have moving parts, the usefulness of this teaching tool will depend upon the durability of its tabs.

But then, in a way, all books could be said to have moving parts. I think as I turn grimy, familiar pages for Brett at bedtime once again. And as she grabs my lapel to pull herself higher in order to see the pictures better, it occurs to me that we all depend upon the durability of our tabs. ♦



## Keep It Concrete

by DOUGLAS BARBOUR

**D**ESPITE THE nay-saying of a number of the more conservative elements in poetry today, the range of possibilities remains as wide as ever. I think this is for the best, and am saddened by such attempts to negate poetic proliferation as Gary Geddes's autocratic removal of concrete poetry from the third edition of *Twentieth Century Poetry and Poetics*, an act that denied more than 2,000 years of pattern and concrete poetry. Of the Canadian writers who have kept this particular flame burning, John Riddell and David UU have both published nifty books recently. Riddell's *E clips E* (Underwhich, 108 pages, \$9.95 paper) is full of new forms of iconographic text, made by shredding, over-painting, and deploying different type sizes, all of which make text a painterly proposition. A visual delight, it continually teases us with potential meaning as well, and suggests that there are ever more possibilities of play as new methods of production arise.

David UU's *High C: Selected Sound & Visual Poems 1965-1983* (Underwhich, 71 pages, \$17.95 paper) is a lovely retrospective of UU's work in various media, including some silkscreen tip-ins. UU practises a classic art as opposed to Riddell's more romantic efforts. The work here ranges from typewriter poems through sly collages to purely pictorial texts. They will startle and delight, reminding readers (viewers) of the childlike joy they once took from simple texture before it became texts.

The Chilean-Canadian poet Gonzalo Millan has also worked in visual modes, but *Strange Houses* (Split Quotation, 250 pages, \$21.35 paper), translated by Annegret Nill, is a large selection of his more straightforward poetry from 1968 to the present. Early on, Millan sought to sidestep "the inflated Self of Post-Surrealism, by redeeming objectivity and introducing colloquial language." After fleeing Chile following the 1973 coup, he produced "*Ciudad/The City*," the 110-page centrepiece of this collection: its simple and reductive syntax reflects the reductions of life under the tyrant's rule, juxtaposing deliberately banal images of advertising beauties and the continually consuming rich with the torture and silencing of the poor. More recent poems explore the nuances of exile in a deliberately aphoristic mode. *Strange Houses* is a moving introduction to a multicultural voice most of us have not even known was here among us.

Susan Musgrave gives us fair warning, in the title poem of *The Embalmer's Art: Selected Poems 1970-1991* (Exile, 170 pages, \$14.95 paper), that "the embalmer's art / is poetry. Of a kind, mind you, / and not to suit everybody's taste." She has here collected poems from all her previous books, and added seven new poems from a forthcoming volume titled *Receiving End of Love*. For new readers, this is as good an introduction to Musgrave's work as they're likely to get. A precocious young writer, she produced

paradigmatic Gothic-symbolist poems from the first, and while her emotional range has broadened, especially towards a biting black humour, and the autobiographical allusions have become both somewhat less privately symbolic and more humorously coy, the basic Gothic strain remains strong. Thus, in the new poems, the protagonist of "Here It Comes — Grief's Beautiful Blow-Job" suffers through various forms of sexual assault only to reiterate that "it didn't even hurt // not the way it hurt to be / loved less"; I've got a feeling there are many battered women who would disagree. Musgrave has made her reputation as a poetic witch, and *The Embalmer's Art* can only enhance that view of her poetry.

Leona Gom has created a very different reputation for her poetry over the years, gaining a wide readership for her wittily realistic memories of growing up on a northern farm and eventually escaping to the big city, her sly interrogations of male-female relationships, and her deeply moving archival digs at the fraught site of the family. Gom has always been a narrative poet, even in her shortest, most clearly imagist poems, and in recent years she has turned to novel writing; thus it is not surprising to find her telling us that *The Collected Poems* (Sono Nis, 274 pages, \$17.95 paper) "will (although poets have said this before and lied) be my last book of poetry." It offers a generous selection from all her previous books, plus two new poems, the latter fact itself as strong a testament as possible that she is not lying. As all her previous books are now out of print, *The Collected Poems* offers a good overview of this poet's realistic and compassionate, humorous and humane, poems.

Sarah Klassen, who also has something of a farm background, works a similar emotional landscape in her narrative sequences. In *Violence and Mercy* (Netherlandic, 110 pages, \$9.95 paper), her second book, the poems aren't necessarily anecdotal, but the connections throughout each sequence are essentially those of story. The sections respond to teaching school, growing up as an immigrant, being hospitalized, travelling through the Far East, reading of war and battle in news reports or the Bible, and viewing the recent exhibition of da Vinci's drawings. Klassen has a good eye for detail, and insists that the imagination must tutor the eye. I prefer her visions to her sermons, as when, instead of telling us how hard it is to write a poem about Jesus, she finishes a poem about how her mother tried to carve her family history in the old country by showing what she knew in her own new place:

*Hawks their dark wings motionless  
carve up the clouds, shafts of sunlight  
fleck the shivering leaves. At my feet  
perfect strawberries ripen  
wild and sweet in the shade.*

The larger narrative arc of novel or autobiography informs that ever-enlarging Canadian genre, the documentary poem, although the best of them subvert simple narration with lyric interventions. The Saskatchewan poet Robert Currie's *Klondike Fever* (Coteau, 112 pages, \$9.95 paper) is the latest such work, and it is based, oddly enough, on the diaries of a New York man who led 17 men to loss and death in the famous Klondike Gold Rush. Currie's attempts to enliven the characterizations, to suggest the awesome qualities of the land that finally defeated these men, and even to invent a wife for Dietz as a psychological balance, all work well as part of his "documentary novel," but there really isn't anything about the book that provides me with the sense that it is poetry rather than fiction. It's a good story of its kind, and the hardships of the trip, on a leaking ship, sledding across the Malaspina Glacier, and losing men to sickness or the elements, have all the qualities of good adventure fiction. But although I enjoyed *Klondike Fever*, I just couldn't escape a feeling of *déjà vu*.

Don Kerr is best known as a kind of prairie anecdotal poet, although his recent *Talkin' Basie* revealed an acute ear for the jazzy sound of conversation. He can also cut a satiric, comic jig, and many of the best poems in *In the City of Our Fathers* (Coteau, 134 pages, \$9.95 paper) demonstrate a Bakhtinian comic flair in coping with the various languages that impinge upon the workings of our lives. Kerr ranges from light, nostalgic visions of prairie pasts, through sardonic views of the rush to replace all signs of those pasts with new, out-of-place buildings, wry commentaries on political life, a few love poems, then "Kill Road," a brilliant sequence of anger and hate, various comic poems on the problems of language and communication, to a series of more serious sardonic poems about being a witness to our time. As this list itself suggests, there is perhaps just too much on his plate in this book, and I have to admit that I felt some editorial cutting would have improved it. When Kerr is on, however, he can hit worthwhile targets, and many of the satiric poems work very well indeed. Since the best of these poems are so pertinent, it's too bad there's a bit too much padding around them. Nevertheless, *In the City of Our Fathers* has much to offer.

Maggie Helwig is a more sombre witness to the wounds of this time and place. A small, deliberately ugly, and careless-looking pamphlet, *Graffiti for J. J. Harper and Other Poems* (Lowlife, unpaginated, \$2 paper) is as angry and immediate as the wall-writing it's named after. Mixing actual representations of ill-spelled graffiti, carefully fragmented documentation from the Harper Inquiry, and her own passionate meditations on the spiritual emptiness of the world in which such people are murdered, Helwig achieves a strangely painful affirmation:

*And he is dead  
and he is dead  
and he is dead  
and I am nothing much  
in the face of the long hate, praying for un-  
identified flying souls, knowing there is blame  
and let understand, eielson, mercy  
God the Propellor  
God the Accident  
God the Condition of Pain.*

In the "other poems," bewailing anomie, isolation, human destruction of the whales and perhaps the whole ecosystem of Earth, she still insists that "we only keep going" and "that the world is round / humility is endless, and it rains" and "that we are simply real." These poems are almost too eager to share the pain: a romantic rhetoric threatens to undermine their spiritual politics. But their cry demands attention, just like the writing on the walls.

Joanne Arnot evokes another kind of pain, the more personal suffering of children in dysfunctional families, in many of the poems of *Wiles of Girlhood* (Press Gang, 96 pages, \$9.50 paper), her first collection. The title piece is a series of small prose takes in the third person, demonstrating how childish imagination provides escape from the attacks that come from within and without the family: it achieves just the right distance. Not all the poems that follow manage that, as they attempt to take us inside a mind and heart braving domestic horrors and surmounting them, if only in the writing. Arnot's control falters sometimes, and usually to the detriment of a poem's literary sincerity, but when she understates and finds the right images that do all the work on their own, these poems hum with a righteous anger that forces a reader to respond. Through poems that confront the sexual abuse of her own childhood, Arnot moves to poems celebrating her own motherhood in all its social and psychological difficulty. "Umbilicus" is especially interesting, because its later formal revision in "Reprise" affirms "womanstrength" beyond simple fear and anger. But, as she suggests, the energy of these poems is essentially fuelled by rage, and it can burn:

*If you were a wild dog  
instead of my father,  
how many times would I try to befriend you,  
before shooting you down?*

Kim Morrissey chooses a famous fictional protagonist through whom to explore the wounds of child abuse in *For Men Who Dream of Lolita* (Coteau, 80 pages, \$9.95 paper). "I am the Book of Dolores B. Haze," says this answer to *Lolita*, "I come with a curse." Especially for the men the title isolates. Morrissey follows the given story, but this time it is Dolores who gets to tell it, and her version darkens further and removes the comedy from the version of "Mr. Humbert Squared." But Morrissey's Dolores is strong, and the poems do not whine; they simply render a stunning taking of innocence in the cool, controlled language of the survivor:

*and now it's the mouth  
the mouth and the tongue  
pressed down  
to the faint smell of sea  
...  
think ice cream  
  
you scream, we all  
hold my tongue  
swallow hard  
  
and relax*

As the narrative behind the poems moves forward, they slip easily across pronominal reference, until we are implicated on both sides of the sex/power equation they interrogate. From the historical documents out of which she made *Batoche*, Morrissey has moved to question the cultural power behind a fictional document. *For Men Who Dream of Lolita* is a powerful strike against patriarchal assumptions.

Robert Hilles's poems have always dealt with family, and in *Finding the Lights On* (Wolsak & Wynn, 88 pages, \$10 paper), he has created a series of poems that with care and doubtful love places him in the midst of life leaving and life arriving. "Letters to My Mother" addresses his mother's madness and absence; with surreal edginess and empathetic domestic imagery these prose poems capture the confusion of feeling her behaviour engendered. The adeptly offbeat sonnets of "Sometimes You Awake Afraid" explore some of the most traditional resonances of love lyrics in terms of married love. Hilles mostly makes the form work for him and against its conventions, but sometimes a degree of abstraction creeps in. The eponymous final section casts a wider net: mass murderers stand far too close to parents and children trying to find a way through the world. In both verse and prose, he uses the resources of sentence structure to confront the dark news of our mortality head on:

*Off in the distance school*

*children wait as though our language were not enough. Soon they will be at our throats like wolves charging from the hills, not waiting to see what love is in our eyes, merely tearing at the flesh, tearing and waiting their madness driven to a frenzy by the grunts of gods.  
Dead. Dead.*

Although pain and suffering are given their place here, the final mood of these poems is not gloomy but vital: these hard lessons, they say, are necessary if we are, as the final sentence in the book puts it, to "learn how to love and how to / save the beautiful for the morning."

After publishing a number of beautiful small books of poetry in the late '60s and early '70s, Nelson Ball has been silent as a poet for 15 years or so. He has recently returned to poetry, and as a statement of intent, perhaps, has released *With Issa: Poems 1964-1971* (ECW, 120 pages, \$12 paper), a loving and lovely collection of exquisitely precise minimal poems. Ball's poems celebrate the nuances of nature and of human relationships; they tell us nothing, but they indicate possibilities and insist upon the engaged eye and spirit. A number of my fellow poets have been talking about this book recently, savouring the force such economy can muster. I was surprised at the light comedy of many of these poems, but not at their precision and subtlety, which I remembered from the earlier books. In the midst of so much romantic rhetoric and expressionist ranting, Ball's poems stake a place for understated craft: they are carefully constructed and offer no bogus pleasure. Just listen to the subtle sounding of as tiny a poem as "Dry Spell," including the delicate leap to two syllables in the final stanza:

*storm  
clouds*

*roll  
past*

*tease  
these*

*rattling  
aspens*

I can only hope that such subtle craft will gain its proper audience this time around. A wonderful book, arousing my desire for the new poems I hope to read soon.

Perhaps the skill and craft of *The Hour's Acropolis* (Harbour, 88 pages, \$9.95 paper) will finally win John Pass the audience he deserves, for the book is a carefully fragmented sequence of poems structured by title upon an opening poem, "Contents." Deliberately, and with classical élan, Pass domesticizes myth and mythologizes domesticity, always finding the "fulcrum / of the spectacle, still / point under // this comic life, exhausting / the plot with prat-falls." Yet if the essential comedy of life is the focus of this book, it does not deny pain, suffering, or loss; rather it finds in the various languages of our searching species the means by which to contextualize them and keep living alive. It's difficult to render the flavour of this subtle yet brilliant poetry; Pass plays the language for both sound and sensual resonance, and he willingly utilizes the poetic rhetoric of many times and cultures. So there are vast intertexts, delightful allusions, a quick wit I love in any writing. His elegy to bpNichol, by placing that private death in the context of Ben Johnson's public fall from grace, displays the kind of music and allusive range he achieves throughout:

*So close*

*and swift you might've missed him, the poet  
took breath and sang and was cut to pieces*

*who called himself "beep" on the phone.  
Sound fellow. Ate a hearty breakfast.*

*Generous, confident, uncomplaining  
on his cane and cushion, a fraggle*

*with the best of them  
they made him the voice*

*of the rock, the echoing  
grave-playful part.*

*"beep here."  
Briefly.*

To me, *The Hour's Acropolis* has already staked its claim as one of the finest books of the year, and I hope to see it on next year's Governor General's short list; but whether it receives that proper accolade or not, I recommend it as a prime example of what fine-tuned poetry can accomplish. ♦



## Natural History

by DOUGLAS HILL

**T**HE BAD NEWS first. *Mythology* (University Editions, 115 pages, US\$8 paper), by Peter Torch, is dreadful. It's an allegory, of sorts. Love, in the guise of a young couple described as "the last two flower children in the world," fights against Evil to allow Good to survive; the time is the near future, the setting North America. Jack, the hero, pursued by the strategems of the Lord of Darkness, journeys on his motorcycle across a decaying continent to rescue Janthene, reset the Clock of Life, and save the world.

The adventure is full of adolescent cartoons of character and incident, and the writing contains enough offences against grammar, usage, punctuation, and taste to demoralize an entire high school English department. Only a masochist would read this book. Only a sadist would try to review it. I'll just quote one early sentence: "Holding out the basket with one hand and holding up her white gown with another, her sandal-wearing feet stepped from one stone to the next." Matters do not improve.

*Hard Aground* (Breakwater, 94 pages, \$14.95 paper), by W. C. Sellars, tells its tale straightforwardly, but there's not much tale to tell. The time is 1965; the narrator, Ralph Fraser, is a Newfoundland-born Toronto businessman who returns to Labrador, where he worked in Intelligence in the Second World War, to renew acquaintances and solve a leftover puzzle about a wartime plane crash and a mysterious German submarine. There's a story here, but the fictional techniques are rudimentary: the plot is thin, the narrative prose stodgy, and the dialogue stiff and improbable. Good intentions, maybe, but an unsatisfying read.

Christopher Moon's short didactic novel, *The Power of the Gift* (Polestar, 124 pages, \$12.95 paper), likewise suffers

from a lack of vitality. A fictionalization of the encounters between a pair of burnt-out thirtyish buddies, Patrick and Peter, and an elderly New Age guru, Garth Xavier, it never rises to the exhilarating heights of its admitted model, the narratives of Carlos Castañeda. The writing is occasionally humorous but never gripping, and Moon has the irritating habit of interfering with his dialogue: characters constantly say things "lamely," "lightly," "kindly," "meekly," "knowingly." This can lead to clunkers: "Two thousand layers — holy doo-doo!" Peter commented wonderingly.

For all its novelistic thinness, the book has considerable therapeutic substance. Most of the documentation of personal and group healing process — which, to be fair, is what Moon really cares about — rings true, and at times can be quite affecting. The basic message is that our lives are in our control; we need not be trapped in our past. Like many self-help books, *The Power of the Gift* will seem simplistic to most readers, but I think it will be illuminating to anyone primed for radical insight.

Joan Hall Hovey's *Listen to the Shadows* (Zebra Books, 320 pages, \$5.50 paper) is a mass-market genre novel; the category is romantic suspense. The author, from New Brunswick, sets her tale in a seaside town (Maine, perhaps) with the usual suspects: the heroine, Katie Summers, a late-blooming artist who supports herself by working in a coffee-shop; the ambiguously attractive, "boyishly handsome" lawyer, Drake Devlin; the gentle, tormented psychiatrist, Jonathan Shea ("wide shoulders straining against the soft camel wool of his blazer"), who treats Karie after a shocking accident. One scary event succeeds another, and the implausibilities of plot and motive mount toward silliness. But all works out for the best, and who cares about loose ends? Hovey writes competently, and

her formula produces a predictable hour or two of light entertainment.

Robert MacNeil, the well-known broadcast journalist, has higher ambitions for *Burden of Desire* (Doubleday, 466 pages, \$27.50 cloth), a mainstream historical romance set against the backdrop of the 1917 Halifax Explosion. And he realizes most of them; this is an intelligent and energetic novel, with a satisfying density of scenic detail and human emotion. If the romantic tangles at the heart of the book depend on an interlocking series of coincidences best left unexamined, no matter; such structural devices never stopped the Victorian novelists.

MacNeil has done his research carefully, and his talent for panoramic narrative serves him well. Historical figures (Robert Borden, J. W. Morrice, Ernest Jones) interact with fictional characters; the themes of the book — the terrible blundering carnage of the Great War, controversies over treating mental illness, the emerging emphasis on sexuality in human development — are built up in situations and discussions that, while occasionally stagi, are seldom trivializing.

*Burden of Desire* is "popular" fiction in the same sense that the work of Pierre Berton and Peter Newman is "popular" history. If it won't find favour with literary critics, it will nonetheless appeal to a wide general readership. MacNeil knows how to write strong and confident prose, how to move a story, and how to flesh out statistics with vividly imagined incidents. Sure, everybody and everything's a bit larger than life, but there's enough stirring drama and nobility of character to compensate. I'll be surprised if a TV mini-series doesn't follow; I mean no slur.

*The Afterlife of George Cartwright* (McClelland & Stewart, 296 pages, \$16.95 paper), by John Steffler, is in the historical

# Why people are rushing to buy this first novel



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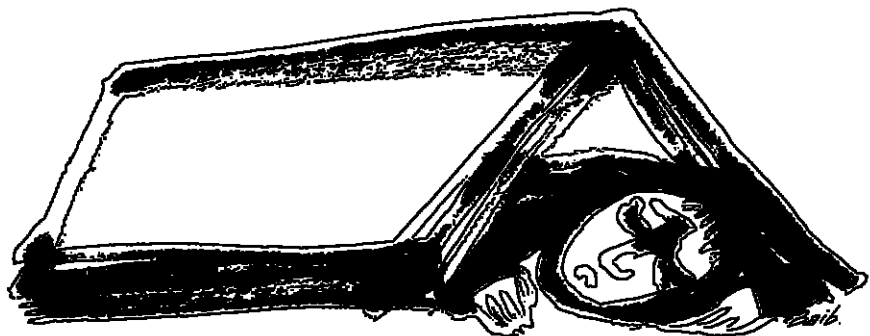
mode, too, but it aims to reinvent, not reproduce. The real George Cartwright (1738-1819), after an undistinguished military career, first sailed to Newfoundland in 1768. Two years later he went back, to set up a trading enterprise in Labrador: his adventures there form the imaginative centre of Steffler's book. By 1779 Cartwright was finished, broken and broke; he would live out his remaining days quietly in Nottinghamshire. He left behind a journal (adding six imagined years to the record), some place-names in Labrador, and enough unanswered questions for a novel.

Steffler is an accomplished poet; what seems to have drawn him to this project are the challenges in structure and language it presented. Happily, he meets and surmounts them with good sense and great skill. He devises a kind of time-warp to bring his hero poignantly into the present day, and interweaves Cartwright's words, historical accounts, and his own descriptions and meditations into a rich fictional tapestry of the past. None of this manipulation is at all heavy-handed; Steffler smoothly evokes time and place

and character for the reader, but his narrative devices never intrude.

In Steffler's hands, Cartwright's human significance is a capacity for dream and wonder joined to unfocused motives and uncertain principles. He is simultaneously enchanted by the experience of the New World and bewildered by it. Adrift upon history's tide, he becomes an exemplar of man's ability to botch his opportunities through an excess of ambition; the novel suggests clearly that this is not a failing peculiar to the 18th century. He is one of "them," and yet also one of us.

*The Afterlife of George Cartwright* teems with natural history and folklore. Scenes of horror — filth, suffering, the crimes of European colonization — are set against the monumental Labrador landscape: "the sky overcast, the clouds high, a ribbed vault in opal and slate-blue spanning the whole earth, the air beneath clear to the rim of the black, flattened hills, the black, flattened sea." Anchored in the past, the book never feels like a period piece. Steffler has taken the dry stuff of history and made of it a stylish, thoroughly engrossing contemporary novel. ♦



CAN WIT NO. 165

WITH SPRING in the air, Can Wit's fancy turns to the tuneful. Imagine, if you will, a CanLit title made into a musical comedy, and then provide an appropriate song or two from its score — "Ivan, Ivan, Make Up Your Mind" from the musical version of Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* is the sort of thing we have in mind. The prize is \$25, and entries should be sent to Can Wit No. 165, Books in Canada, 33 Draper St., Second Floor, Toronto, On M5V 2M3. The deadline is July 31.

#### Results of Can Wit No. 163

WE WERE delighted with the deluge of entries sparked by our call for humorous, near-miss versions of CanLit classics. According to the chortle index among *Books in Canada* staffers, Graham Steele of Halifax, N.S., was the clear winner for Hugh MacLennan's "Check the Barometer" and Rohinton Mistry's "Quite the Trip." Honourable mentions to Margaret S. Young of Sydney, N.S., for Sinclair Ross's "As For Me and My Habitual Abode," and to Edward Baxter of Stratford, Ont., for E. J. Pratt's "Towards the Last Nail."



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

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. "\_\_\_\_\_ health":  
in the pink (3 wds.)

165 28 135 86 153 60 13 180  
92 190 6 123

B. Going out of fashion

25 178 186 111 149 174 62 151  
116 5 171

C. George \_\_\_\_\_, author of *The Catalan Poems*

98 163 66 10 50 181 94 140  
59

D. Fawning followers

128 71 54 104 97 118 161

E. *Streets of \_\_\_\_\_*, 1990  
Jason Sherman anthology

21 44 107 155 33 159 51 11

F. Wealthy

142 106 185 46

G. Painter Jack \_\_\_\_\_

172 14 109 36 158 183 145 17

H. "\_\_\_\_\_ experience":  
practical training (2 wds.)

99 67 77 110 89 124 139

I. Graphic artist Pitseolak \_\_\_\_\_

40 120 18 82 167 112 69

J. Struck out toward (2 wds.)

20 102 189 37 74 122 177 2

K. *Books in Canada*  
contributors, say

24 64 88 8 175 150 16 58

L. Frederick Philip Grove novel  
(3 wds.)

130 34 4 48 143 23 93 101  
166 53 188 75 57 157 179

M. Member of pacifist,  
German-speaking sect

49 162 32 56 90 96 138 45  
129

N. Yeats's playhouse (2 wds.)

132 41 115 176 7 156 164 121  
148 78 26 114

O. Naked-by-choice person

22 119 80 47 103 65

P. Sir Wilfred \_\_\_\_\_, medical  
missionary

169 12 100 133 184 85 35 144

Q. Made empty

19 154 76 91 187 15 137 63  
30

R. Borders Ontario, Manitoba,  
and Minnesota (4 wds.)

131 3 83 146 186 95 152 170  
79 173 42 127 27 55

S. Son of Daedalus

1 113 29 125 43 68

T. Well, maybe that, then  
(2 wds.)

31 141 81 160 108 87 70

U. Landed a fish, aided by pole

147 61 72 105 38 52

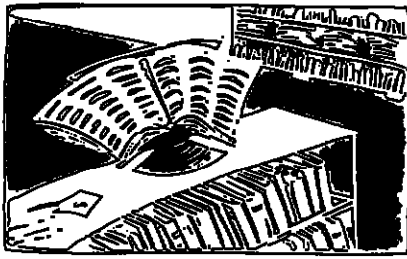
V. Saw a David Cronenberg  
film, say

126 73 168 134 182 84 39 117  
9

SOLUTION TO ACROSTIC #45

"The town fathers called their women *wives*, *daughters*. They locked away in their hearts the pink and impossibly blue Dresden images of mothers dead or remote. They found no name for the lake to the south of Kleinberg."

*Kleinberg*, by Michael Kenyon (Oolichan)



## Vodka Good, Meat Rotten

by ALEC McEWEN.

**S**TYLISH WRITING. Although the 1992 edition of *The Canadian Press Stylebook* is mainly intended to help journalists and editors, it provides a useful reference source for anyone interested in good writing. Among the few criticisms that the book deserves is its refusal to accept the modern use of *gender* as an alternative for *sex*. It is true that *gender* relates strictly to nouns and pronouns, not to humans, plants, and animals, and that expressions like *gender gap* and *gender equality* are ungrammatical applications. Yet the word *sex*, in the sense of sexual activity, is now so widespread that *gender* has almost inevitably replaced it for the description of male or female categories. *Gender* can no longer be summarily dismissed, as it was in Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, as a blunder or a jocular-ity. Canadian Press also displays some inconsistency in its forms of spelling. It favours *Labor Party*, not *Labour Party*, for the British political organization, simply because its own normal style is *labor*. The irrationality of this alteration of a proper noun may be seen from the fact that whereas *aluminum* is the preferred North American spelling, a major Canadian producer of that commodity is Alcan Aluminium Limited, a corporate name that can only be properly spelled in that manner. A minor quibble concerns the use of bracketed metric equivalents for imperial distances, where the example "Canada's 200-mile (320-kilometre) fishing limit" is in error. By international convention, the widths of all maritime zones, including coastal fishing areas, are defined in terms of nautical miles, not statute miles, so the correct metric conversion is 370 kilometres.

**E**NORMITY, ENORMOUSNESS. A Vancouver editor, in an article that appeared in *paragraph* magazine, justifiably complained that the spellings of English classical poets had been altered to the American form in a modern anthology. In his view the resulting inconsistency was "hardly surprising given the enormity of the task." Although many grammarians insist that enormity means outrage, not large size, it is commonly used in either of those senses. The main objection to such dual usage is the possibility of ambiguity. A reference to the enormity of a building, for example, might suggest that it is huge, or unsightly, or both. Enormousness is rejected by some authorities as being unfamiliar, even awkward. Yet there are other synonyms, such as immensity and vastness, that could be used instead, without causing misunderstanding or confusion. Canadian dictionaries tend to confine the meaning of enormity to monstrous wickedness or gross deviation from the acceptable standard.

**I**NFANTICIDE: To illustrate the occurrence of child deaths by culpable homicide in Toronto, the *Globe and Mail* cited two recent killings: one of a girl by her father's common-law wife, and the other of a boy by his babysitter. Both deaths were incorrectly described as *infanticide*, a crime in which, according to the newspaper, the killer is usually a parent, "and that parent is usually the mother." Neither of the two deaths was *infanticide*, for under Canadian law that crime can be committed *only* by a mother. *Infanticide*, which carries a punishment of up to five years imprisonment, applies only where a mother's wilful act or omission caused the death of her child who was born alive and who died before its first birthday. A further

condition is that, at the time of her child's death, the mother's mind was disturbed, either from the effects of giving birth to the child or from the consequent lactation. Even if the mother's mind is not proved to have been disturbed, however, she may still be convicted unless it is established that her act or omission was not wilful.

**O**N THE TREADMILL. *CanadExport*, a federal government publication, carried a laudatory item about prosperous Costa Rica and the foreign-investment opportunities it offers. As a group of citizens living under a private enterprise, free-market system, the country's middle class is said to be "firmly on the economic tread mill of the global economy." Since the figurative use of *treadmill* implies a dull, monotonous life that seems to be going nowhere, Costa Rica's middle class appears to be less enviable than the writer really meant to suggest.

**L**OST IN TRANSLATION. There is a tale, perhaps apocryphal, that when an English speaker quoted "The spirit indeed is willing but the flesh is weak" at the United Nations, the Russian translation appeared as "The vodka is good but the meat is rotten." In the *Globe and Mail's* report of a museum's recent acquisition of Mata Hari's scrapbooks, the adopted name of the seductive Dutch-Japanese spy is translated as "eye of the morning." Although eye (*mata*) of the day (*hari*) is a better literal translation, the everyday meaning of the expression is the sun. The Malay language uses the word *mata* in a variety of colourful compounds, of which two other examples are *mata mata* (all eyes) for police officer, and *anak mata* (eye child) for optic pupil. ♦

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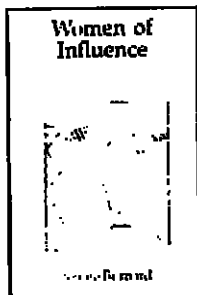
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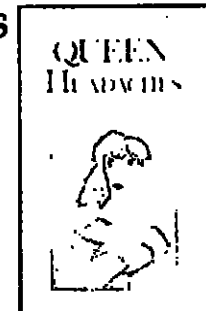
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