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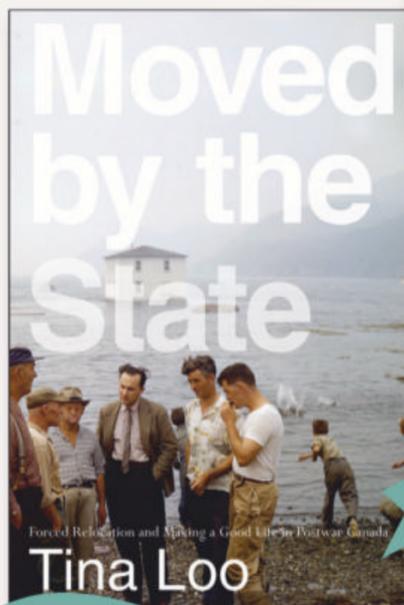
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# Literary Review of Canada

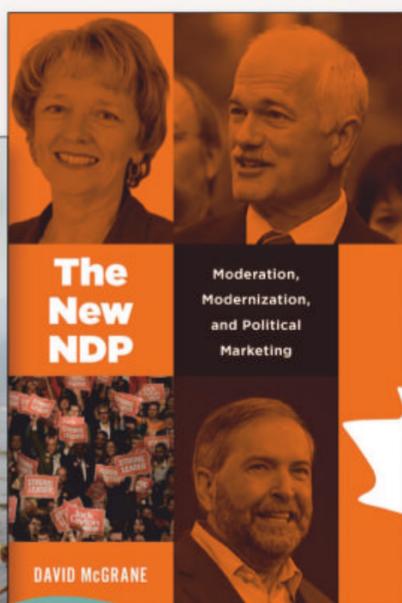
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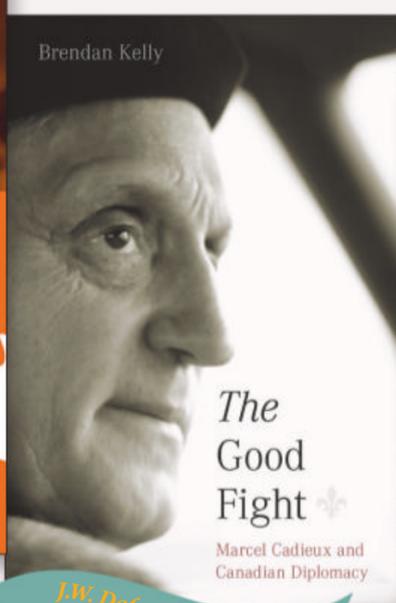
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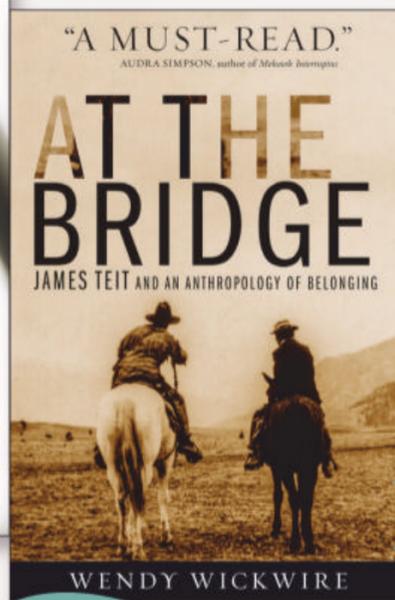
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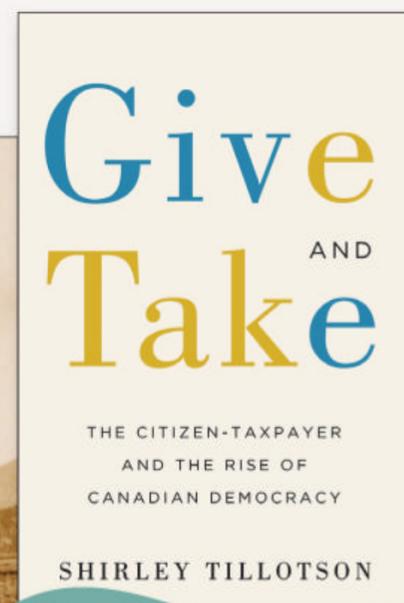
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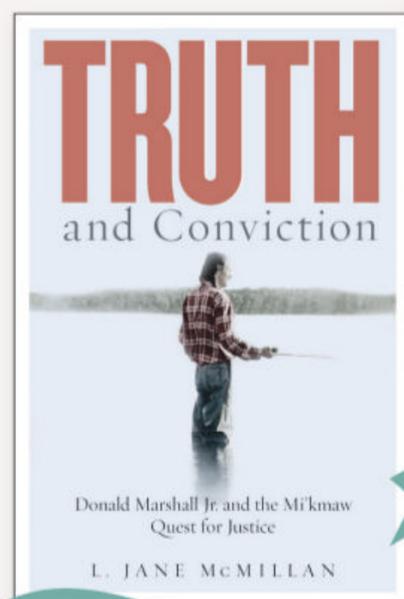
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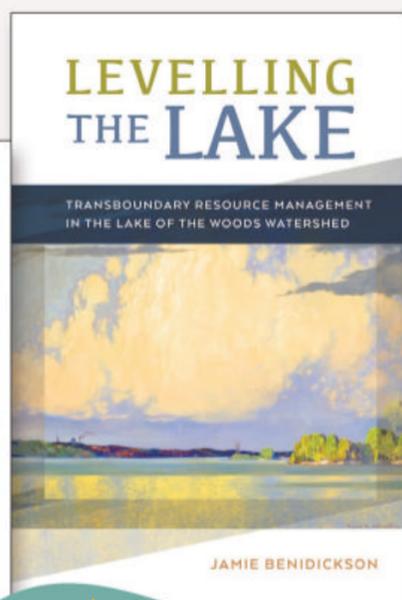
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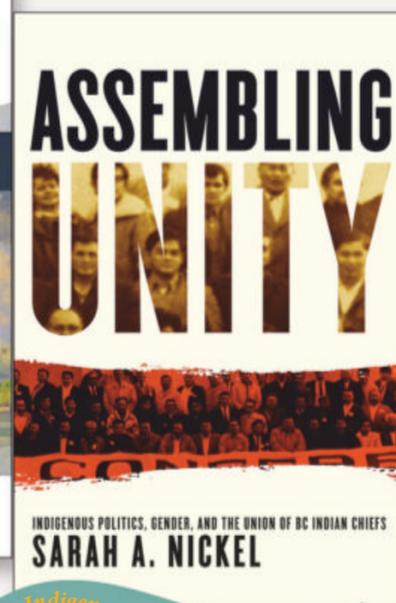
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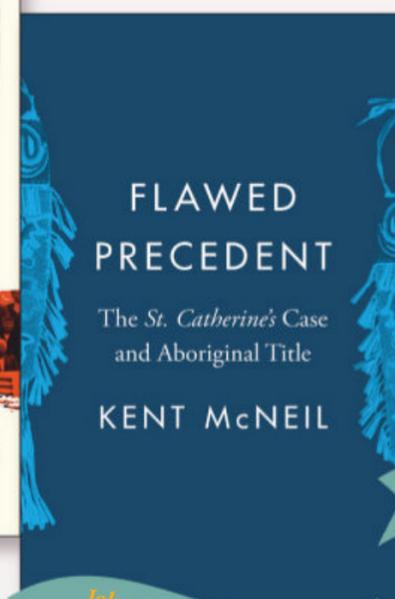
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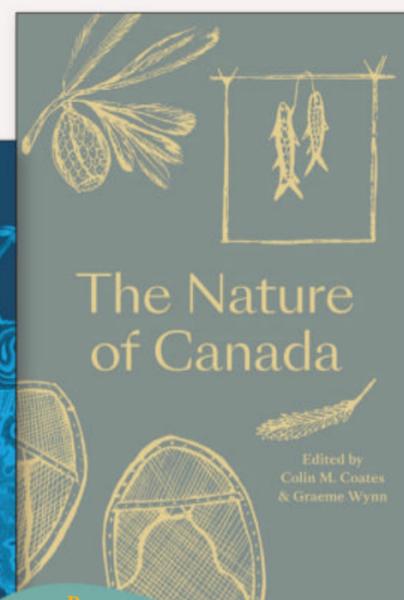
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# Literary Review of Canada

A JOURNAL OF IDEAS

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On the cover: "Damn Yankees," by **Salini Perera**.

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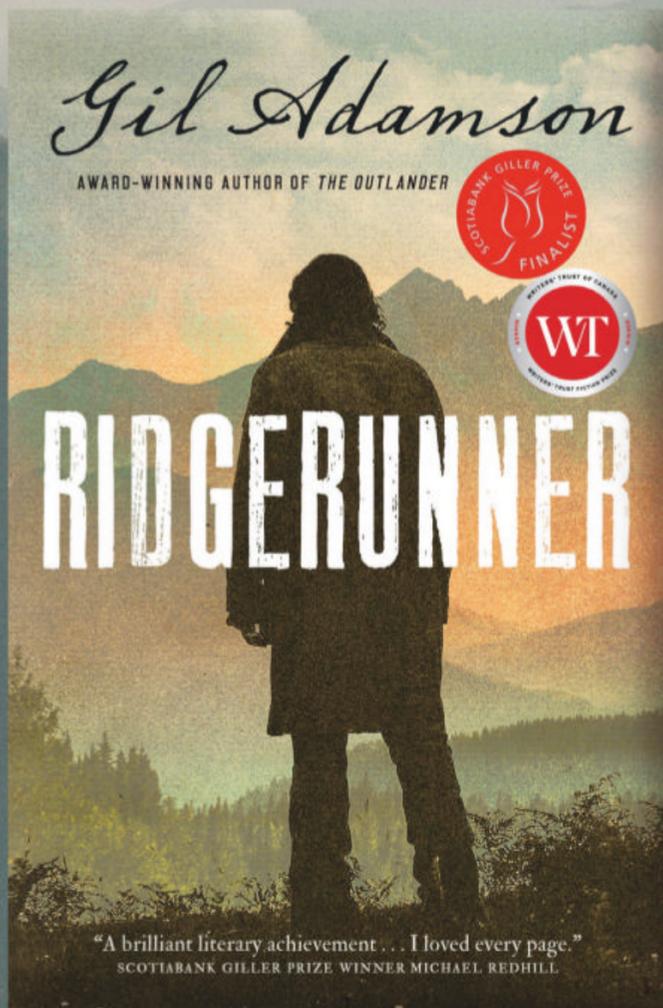
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**– Marina Endicott, award-winning author of *The Difference***

**"A BRILLIANT LITERARY ACHIEVEMENT."**

**– Michael Redhill, Scotiabank Giller Prize-winning author of *Bellevue Square***

## Shot in the Arm

**I**N *TO-MORROW*, DATED AUGUST 1803, THE Anglo-Irish writer Maria Edgeworth portrays a couple weighing the pros and cons of various preventive measures against smallpox. The wife, Lucy, wants to have her only son inoculated in the “common way,” by which she means variolation, a mild but (hopefully) preventive infection. Her husband, Basil, knows there’s something a little more cutting-edge out there: “I think we had better have him vaccinated.”

Edgeworth, a literary celebrity in her day, was writing just five years after Edward Jenner first described vaccination, in *An Inquiry into the Causes and Effects of the Variolae Vaccinae*, and the technique’s efficacy was still under review by the Royal College of Physicians. In her novella, she paints Basil as a learned man who keeps up with the papers, a man who sees tremendous potential in medical advancement. But despite being informed of current events and despite his wife’s desperate urging — “Oh, my dearest love, do not put it off till to-morrow” — Basil takes a rather unhurried approach. “My friend, Mr. L-, has had all his children vaccinated,” he tells Lucy, “and I just wait to see the effect.”

We are all Basil now.

In a head-spinning turn of events, so-called V-Day arrived sooner than many of us expected and mass vaccination against COVID-19 is now under way, with a ninety-year-old retired shop clerk from Coventry receiving the first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine on December 8, at 6:31 in the morning. (Eighty-one-year-old William Shakespeare, of Warwickshire, received the second injection: “A mark marvellous well shot, for they both did hit it,” indeed.)

Pfizer should soon be joined by Moderna, AstraZeneca, and Johnson & Johnson in delivering millions of doses around the world, and it seems that most Canadians are willing to get in line and roll up their sleeves — after they’ve had a chance to see the effect, of course. In early December, an Ipsos/Radio-Canada poll found that while 63 percent of respondents plan to get the shot, more than half want to wait a little while. This is in keeping with what the peer-reviewed journal *Nature Medicine* found in an earlier survey of nineteen countries, published in October: “Current levels of willingness to accept a COVID-19 vaccine are insufficient to meet the requirements for community immunity.”

Sadly, V-Day never arrives for Basil and Lucy’s young son. Basil appreciates the urgency of the situation, but he has Rousseau’s *Emilius and Sophia* to finish and some errands to run. He thinks he can buy some time. He soon finds out, though, that “a few hours may sometimes make all the difference between health and sickness, happiness and misery.” His son contracts smallpox and dies.

So far in this pandemic, we have lost more than a million and a half people, and the daily case numbers climb yet higher and higher. We’ll continue to skeptically eye strangers who sneeze in public for months to come, just as we’ll continue to wear masks (yes, even the vaccinated among us). But the banner headline is hard to ignore: “A Fix to the Crisis Is Near.”

Transfixed as we are by the cure that is, still too many of us are blind to the cure that isn’t. “To put it simply,” the secretary-general of the United Nations, António Guterres, said in a major climate address at Columbia University on December 2, “the state of the planet is broken.” The symptoms of this other sickness are legion: We are losing our ice, our wetlands, our forests, our coral reefs, our fish stocks. Even with lockdown measures in place for much of 2020, carbon dioxide levels are climbing, methane is pouring out of the thawing permafrost, and nitrous oxide emissions have gone up 123 percent — once again threatening the ozone layer. The fires, the floods, the hurricanes, the tornadoes, the heat waves are more biblical with each passing season. And, as Guterres reminds us, “there is no vaccine for the planet.”

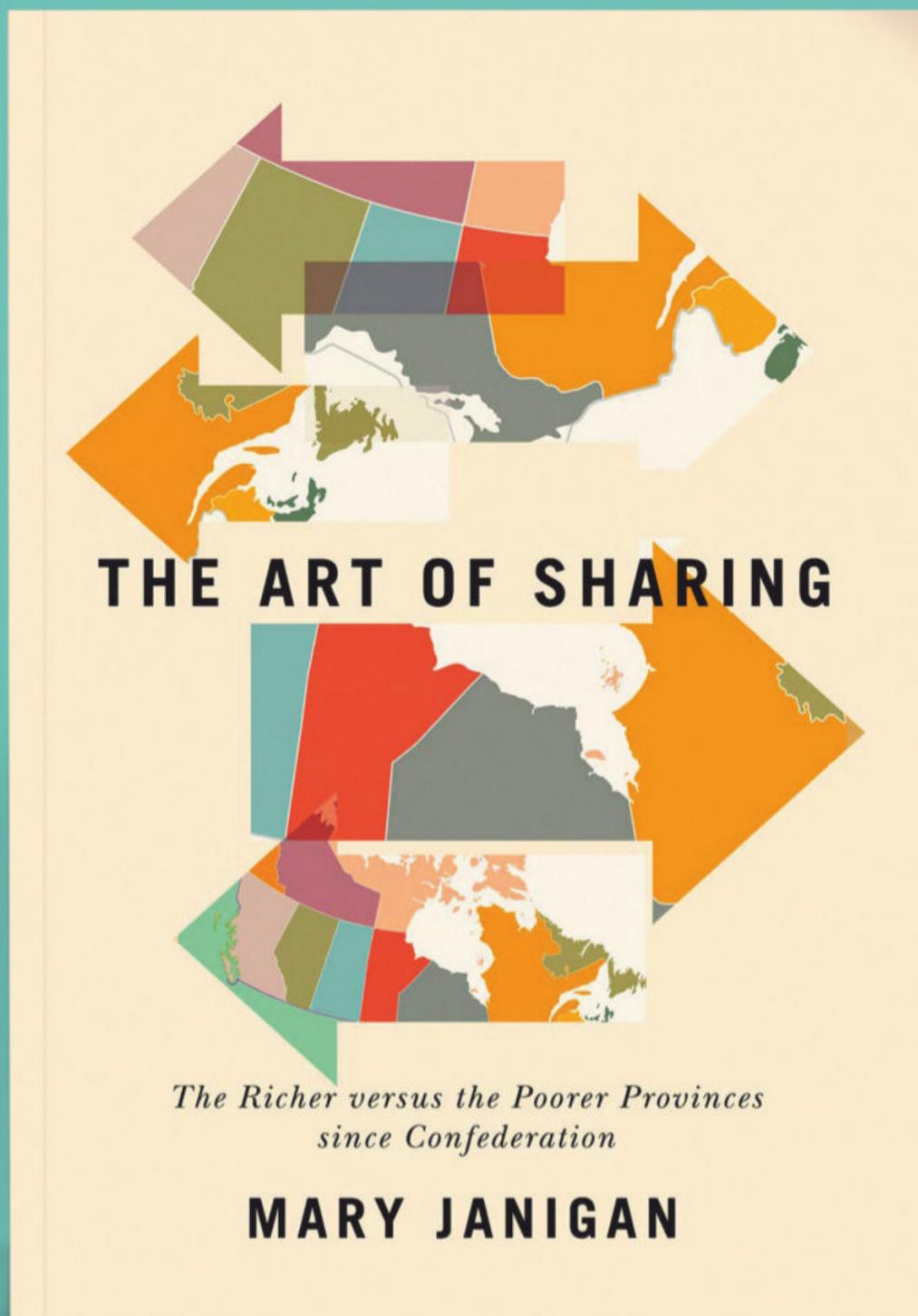
No tomorrow comes in *To-morrow*, because Basil ignores the increasingly grim reality that stares him in the face. So confident is he in human ingenuity to solve a crisis on a timeline of his own making, so caught up with his own affairs, that he ignores the well-being of the next generation. But once the mistakes really start to compound, there is no going back. “I felt the consciousness that they were all occasioned by my own folly,” he finally admits.

We should all celebrate the ingenuity that will, eventually, bring this viral nightmare to an end. But we cannot wait for some equally ingenious solution to the other, more serious crisis we face. We cannot wait to see the effect of another tenth of a degree, and then another. We can no longer put this off till tomorrow. 

*Kyle Wyatt, Editor-in-Chief*

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# Furthermore

**RE: *This Is Not the End of the Story*  
by Ian Waddell (December)**

IAN WADDELL ASSERTS THAT HIS STORY OF HOW Aboriginal rights were recognized in Canada's new constitution "is not the end." One of the reasons this may be true is that his telling of the story is so incomplete.

For reasons that only he can explain, he ignores the influential — and decisive — role that Inuit leaders played in lobbying to get the Aboriginal rights clause into the first and then the final drafts of the patriation resolution. Even more strangely, when listing the members of his own caucus who were advocating for the clause's inclusion (Jim Manley, Jim Fulton, himself), Waddell studiously ignores his colleague Peter Ittinuar, the first Inuk elected to Parliament and one of only two NDP members who sat on the special joint committee that toured the country to gather public input on the draft resolution (Svend Robinson being the other member). In fact, Ittinuar was the person who ultimately moved the motion to include section 34 (now section 35). To ignore Ittinuar's role and the supporting role of the Inuit Committee on National Issues is to do them both a great disservice.

At the other end of the story — when section 35 was yanked from the draft resolution on November 25, 1981, to appease certain premiers — Waddell recounts how "Indigenous leaders and allies, including the Vancouver lawyer Louise Mandell and hundreds of others, flocked to Ottawa by train, aboard the Constitution Express. They forced the prime minister and the premiers to restore section 35." While there was indeed widespread public outrage over the dropping of the Aboriginal rights clause (as well as the women's equality clause), it was Ittinuar and the national Inuit leadership who secured a private meeting with Pierre Trudeau at 24 Sussex and persuaded him to hold off bringing the resolution to a vote for a month, to allow them to pursue lobbying efforts to bring the necessary number of premiers on board. As it turned out, it was Peter Lougheed of Alberta who bent to both the lobbying and the public pressure and acceded to Canadians' desire to see Aboriginal rights recognized in a new constitution, albeit with the word "existing" added to the clause.

Waddell ends his account with a long list of individuals whose "moral courage" led to the successful inclusion of Aboriginal rights in Canada's new constitution — Broadbent, Berger, Trudeau, Watts, Woodward, Rosenbloom, Aldridge, and Chrétien. Heroes all, but not an Inuk in sight.

One has to wonder how much of Waddell's exclusion of the Inuit role was influenced by the fact that Ittinuar later left the NDP and joined

the Liberals. If such is the case, almost forty years later, it can only be assumed that Waddell buries his political grudges with well-marked Xs. Whatever the reason, the end result is an incomplete telling of the behind-the-scenes story.

For the full story to be told, history must record that it was more than the white guys who did it.

**Murray Angus  
Ottawa**

**RE: *Don't Kid Yourself*  
by Jessica Duffin Wolfe (December)**

A VERY WELL WRITTEN AND POIGNANT PIECE. THERE are lessons for trade policy in this as well!

**@Camillerilaw  
via Twitter**

**RE: *Twists of Fate*  
by Ethan Lou (November)**

I READ "TWISTS OF FATE" WITH GREAT INTEREST. Ethan Lou gets at something I've definitely felt yet could not place; he put it into words beautifully and eloquently. The examples he cites are great, and the way he strings them together — it was exactly what I've been feeling inside.

The pandemic is changing the world in all sorts of ways, but I feel the biggest one is the one we can't put a finger on. I was particularly struck when Lou mentions "that book that never became your favourite because you never saw it on the lap of a fellow subway rider." I think about how I discover new books — conversations with friends, word of mouth, browsing a bookshop, and so on. It's almost always by chance.

I did pick up Lou's new book, *Field Notes from a Pandemic*, after reading his essay (thanks for pointing me to a great title). But I wonder about the broader "discoverability" of new books when we increasingly lack moments of chance. Will reading become more exclusive, becoming the domain only of those who actively seek it out? And if so, will we end up with less and less selection and variety of titles?

**Tamsin Tahoma  
Toronto**

LOST BUT NOT FOREVER. THE REAL VALUE OF ANY conference is not what's happening on the plenary floor but what's happening in the corridors. Post-pandemic there will be a huge pent-up demand for human contact.

**@DSProudfoot  
via Twitter**

**RE: *Power Down*  
by Srdjan Vucetic (November)**

IF I HAVE CORRECTLY READ SRDJAN VUCETIC'S excellent review of *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order*, one of the book's main lessons is that liberty and democracy don't necessarily go together.

This was the theme of C. B. Macpherson's 1964 CBC Massey Lectures, *The Real World of Democracy*, where he traced the emergence of Western democracy as individualized freedom of choice in a market-like competition among alternatives. Similarly, the late U.S. Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg spent much of her career arguing that liberty without equality is largely mere rhetoric. This point was eloquently elaborated by Pamela Karlan in her elegiac essay on that fiercely intelligent, principled jurist in *The New York Review of Books* (October 22).

Thank you for this timely reminder that the work of democracy building is ongoing — and possibly barely begun.

**Heather Menzies  
Gabriola, B.C.**

**RE: *Migrations*  
by Sarah Wylie Krotz (October)**

AFTER READING SARAH WYLIE KROTZ'S ESSAY IN THE *Literary Review of Canada*, "Migrations": My eyes rise to the skies. My ears open. Get out. Walk for birds.

**@peterpoole  
via Twitter**

**...and Remembering the Boys of Summer**

I AM WRITING IN MY CAPACITY AS CHAIR OF THE newly formed Century Committee with the Society for American Baseball Research. The idea behind our group is to celebrate important milestones in baseball history. I just wanted to say that in this role, it was my great pleasure to bring your excellent September 2020 baseball pieces to the attention of our members. I do hope that you will let Mark Kingwell ("The Ashes") and Michael Taube ("A Sultan's Education") know that their fine work was very much appreciated.

**Sharon Hamilton  
Ottawa**

Write to [letters@reviewcanada.ca](mailto:letters@reviewcanada.ca) or tag our social media channels. We may edit comments and feedback for length, clarity, and accuracy.

# The Magical History Tour

It was the summer of '69

David Macfarlane

## John Lennon, Yoko Ono and the Year Canada Was Cool

Greg Marquis

James Lorimer & Company

248 pages, softcover and ebook

**C**ONCLUSIONS ABOUT BOOKS drawn from single sentences are reckless adventures, if you ask me. Words don't operate fully as words except in the presence of other words. The same is true of sentences, which depend on context for their resonance. It is in the variations of their echoes that nuance is established. And nuance, as it turns out, is often what makes writing interesting. As a rule, things are not what they declare themselves to be between a capital letter and a full stop. The story is usually more complicated than that.

Naturally, there are exceptions to this rule. There are sentences that, unassisted, provide readers with a good, solid sense of a book as a whole. I am going to quote such a sentence from Greg Marquis's thoroughly researched and intriguing cultural history, *John Lennon, Yoko Ono and the Year Canada Was Cool*. But first, some background.

If, like me, you are a Canadian, a Beatles fan, and a thousand years old, you will recall that John Lennon and Yoko Ono kept showing up here (of all places) in 1969. In my world — meaning the world as I saw it when I was seventeen — this was very big news.

I was one of those nerdy, slightly irritating "John is my favourite Beatle" types, but the position was (I still maintain) defensible. By 1969, I wasn't following John's post-Beatle forays with anything like my earlier dedication to the band. But that didn't really matter. I'd always been a fan. Years before, when I first heard the Beatles' cover of the Isley Brothers' "Twist and Shout" (I can picture my friend's living room on a Saturday afternoon when his parents were out and we could turn up the hi-fi), I knew Lennon was someone worth idolizing, at least for a while.

It's hard to convey the excitement — the actual, physical, in-the-pit-of-my-stomach excitement — of John Lennon's stupendously good, stretched-to-its-limit vocal on "Twist and Shout." The conditions in my friend's living room on that long-ago Saturday afternoon were never to be repeated, of course. They relied on the Beatles being the Beatles and on my being almost a teenager. It was the purest blast of rock 'n' roll I'd ever felt.

Youthful revelations are not always a reliable guide over the long run, but this one was. Lennon (particularly on the pre-*Revolver* albums,



The pyjama-clad host and hostess were a "darling couple."

in my opinion) had a truly great pop voice. The whine that made his speaking a bit reedy was perfect for rock 'n' roll. And I do mean perfect. Just give his vocal in "Anna," from the Beatles' 1963 debut album, *Please Please Me*, a listen.

That same year, the Beatles did a cover of the Marvelettes' 1961 hit "Please Mr. Postman." It's as good as it is for a number of reasons, none more important than Lennon's voice. Of course, it's a great song. Dangerously great. The Marvelettes were a tough act to follow. But the Beatles (being the Beatles) pulled it off, and Lennon's vocal is particularly good. He seems sometimes to be channelling the spirit of the kind of American pop music that other young English musicians were only imitating. He got it somehow.

Lennon was a very good (I would say underrated) rhythm guitar player. He was, obviously, a great songwriter and an inventive musical spirit. But it was in his voice that you could most clearly hear how well he knew and how much he loved the music that inspired his band. His voice was a lightning rod struck by the Shirelles and the Marvelettes, by Ray Charles and Buddy Holly, by Chuck Berry and Elvis. At his best (and here I remain in complete agreement with my younger self), he really was rock 'n' roll.

So that was what first sold me on John. His activism and superstar celebrity came later, but I was on board with that too. The "War Is Over! (If You Want It)" ad campaign, Yoko's extremely weird performance from inside a bag (don't ask) at the Toronto Pop Festival, Lennon's ongoing

battles with Richard Nixon, the military-industrial complex, American immigration, and the other Beatles — this all figured largely in my sense of how the universe was unfolding in those days. By 1969, there were few celebrities, as far as I was concerned, of equal stature. But, of course, I thought very differently about both John Lennon and Canada in those days — and one of the pleasures of reading Marquis's book is being reminded of that.

Lennon's name had none of the association with tragedy that it immediately has for me now. He was dashing and bold in a kooky kind of way, and Marquis captures his convictions and contradictions deftly. Lennon was interesting, and he was funny. His outrage at the Vietnam War was entirely justified, and he was trying to figure out how to use his celebrity for good. I see no reason now why I should not have admired him as I did then. On top of which he was a Beatle. And it's worth recalling, as Professor Marquis does (he teaches in the Department of History and Politics at the University of New Brunswick), that during the period covered in this book, it was not yet officially clear that the Beatles had broken up.

Broken up, like forever.

For the seventeen-year-old me, the ongoing speculation about the Beatles was existential — a word I happened to know thanks to an adventurous grade 11 English teacher. Existentialism makes perfect sense — in fact, it's obviously how things are — during those interesting, fun-filled years when you have a

different body, a different voice, and a different brain every time you turn around. “Man is condemned to be free,” wrote Jean-Paul Sartre. I wasn’t certain what that meant, but it always got a red check mark when I worked it into a grade 11 essay, and to the extent that I did understand the freedom of existential choice, I could see that each year of my teens had been an advance in some unfated and unpredictable way on its predecessor. The same was true of Beatles records. To this day, if I am recalling something from that distant time, I use the order of those albums as a way of keeping track of my own personal history. Puberty, for instance, was something that happened somewhere around *Rubber Soul* and *Revolver*, and an association like that is not to be taken lightly. The Beatles slowly breaking up wasn’t something that was just happening. It was something that was happening *to me*.

So, for all kinds of reasons, John Lennon was a huge deal for me in 1969, and it was fun to be reminded by Marquis’s portrait of what now feels almost like an old friendship. I’d nearly forgotten the comfortable feeling of thinking of Lennon as something like an admired counselor, a hip, young teacher, maybe an impossibly cool, moved-out-of-the-house-a-while-ago older brother. Was he a role model for me? You bet he was. Recreating the context of John Lennon’s cultural heroism (cultural heroism, that is, as millions of John Lennon fans imagined it) is one of the achievements of *John Lennon, Yoko Ono and the Year Canada Was Cool*. It was a different time. For one thing, John Lennon’s worst songs had not yet been played to death every Christmas.

Marquis is quite right to take a good look at this strangely Canadian moment, if only because it sprang from such an intriguing confluence of characters and themes: pop culture meets the Vietnam War meets Quebec nationalism meets Pierre Trudeau meets Yoko Ono meets Thor Eaton. What a strange trip it was, and yet many of the subjects feel contemporary: the ascent of celebrity, the dominance of pop culture, the rise of nationalism, the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of protest, the circumvention of mainstream media. All these are playing out today, just as they played out in Canada in 1969 — most famously, in, on, and around a queen-size bed in a suite in the Queen Elizabeth Hotel, in Montreal, where, along with Timothy Leary, Tommy Smothers, et al., “Give Peace a Chance” was recorded and the term “bed-in” was (inevitably) coined.

And here, as is his professorial wont, Greg Marquis steps in to translate the ’60s terminology. Which gets us, finally, to the single, unassisted sentence from *John Lennon, Yoko Ono and the Year Canada Was Cool* that I maintain is a clue to the book’s fundamental nature: “The bed-in is often portrayed as a spontaneous and somewhat chaotic 1960s ‘happening’ (a term for performance art, or in some cases, a hip social event associated with the counterculture).”

Based on no evidence other than that sentence, a reasonably perceptive reader — someone attuned, perhaps, to the ebb and flow of popular vernacular — could accurately conclude that whatever else this book is, it is most definitely not cool. I’m not all that cool myself, but even I know that nobody cool says “a hip social event.” Ditto for “a somewhat chaotic 1960s ‘happening.’”

## and the danger ended —

we came out of our hiding places,  
the undershrub, old leaning fence,  
Mrs. Liebowitz’s shed, or the tire mound  
in the tangled ravine —

and Mooney called ally-olly-incomfree again,  
so the youngest Dunphy would hear,  
wriggle out of the crack, smirking,  
and we’d wipe the weeds from our pants  
and faces, sighing a deep heave

that WE were not IT; my brother had  
been tagged, and it was his turn to  
hide his eyes and count, and hunt, and  
search for the most exposed, the one  
who couldn’t hide fast enough, or  
find a place just right for a small body

and the danger spiked again, electric  
in the spine-hair of fear  
that we might be caught, be tagged, be the next IT —  
and some of us grabbed a youngster by the hand  
to stuff them safe in a leaf pile, and some of us  
kicked the crab ladder off the wall, so no one could  
follow; and some just hid, some ran, one cried —

all of us in the game, and not, wondering  
why the chill of the chase, night after night?

Kate Marshall-Flaherty

*Kate Marshall-Flaherty is the author of, most recently, Radiant and Reaching V.*

*John Lennon, Yoko Ono and the Year Canada Was Cool* is doggedly, you might even conclude deliberately uncool. It took some initial adjustment, but I came to think of this as not a bad thing. If the book were all cool and ironic and clever, it wouldn’t be as vivid as it is. Uncoolness provides a stable platform for the story Marquis wants to tell. This is clear from the get-go. Consider the title alone: total squaresville.

The book’s title is as square as its design, as a matter of fact. If this were a textbook from a sociology course you had to take in 1975 and the title was *Studies in Twentieth-Century Canadian Popular Culture*, you wouldn’t have to change a thing. The display copy on the back cover is equally anachronistic: “Follow the celebrity couple on their visits to Canada in 1969 and discover the spirit of the Sixties, Canadian-style.”

And yet . . . and yet. Marquis is an informed guide, and eventually I came to find the book’s absence of coolness interesting. Interestingly ambiguous, to be precise. Does *John Lennon, Yoko Ono and the Year Canada Was Cool* simply have (and the thought did cross my mind) a terrible title on a terrible cover? Or is the cover — a combination of sans serif text, background blankness, and an absolutely predictable stock press photograph — meant to be ironic?

No subject on God’s green earth attracts ironists like pop music. It is prudent, therefore, to wade into the thickets of cultural history with caution when there are guitars involved. Because (and this thought also crossed my mind) the cover of *John Lennon, Yoko Ono and the Year Canada Was Cool* could be a perfect imitation of those year-end roundups that Canadian newspapers published in 1969.

In those distant, pre-digital days, there were creatures called arts reporters who sometimes wrote of their forays into the counterculture, and when they did, they were writing for a readership that comprised teenagers (like me) and adults (like my parents). For this cross-generational reason, arts reporters had to assume that many of their readers (like my parents) couldn’t tell a Beatle from a Rolling Stone, or a Dylan from a Donovan. Everything about rock ‘n’ roll had to be explained to people who didn’t get it. Marquis employs the same didactic approach. I found it kind of comforting, frankly. It took me back.

“In the 1960s, no one was cooler than the Beatles,” the professor writes in his introduction. It’s one of a number of sentences in his documentation of Lennon and Ono’s three visits to Canada in 1969 that might as well not be there at all.

Assuming that we are all on the same page about what “cool” is, it’s not an indisputable statement that there was not a single person in the whole entire world who was a teensy bit cooler than the Beatles in the 1960s. And let’s start the list with Nina Simone and Miles Davis. But who cares? How do you measure such a thing? Honestly, what does it matter, and if it doesn’t matter, why say it? If the point is that the Beatles were influential in the 1960s, well, I think most readers would take that as a given.

There are similar sentences scattered throughout these couple hundred pages — sentences that affirm mythologies so well established in pop history that their affirmation seems unnecessary. Did you know, for example, that there was a big rock festival at Woodstock, New York, in the summer of 1969? Well, hang on to your reading chair, because “participants spoke of the memorable music, the spontaneity, the positive vibrations (‘vibes’) and the sense of community, with people helping pick up garbage and volunteering to assist those experiencing bad LSD trips.”

These are flyover sentences that a reader simply skips — but not because they are wrong or offensive or poorly written. Marquis has a calm narrative voice. He has a pleasantly lucid style. And his judgment seems sound. So far as I can tell (and so far as I can remember), he is generally right about what English Canada was generally like in 1969, although, as he acknowledges, an Indigenous historian or one from Quebec would view the year (and the occasional visits of a rich, eccentric musician and his no less eccentric partner, a Japanese artist) from quite a different perspective. The flyover sentences are

flown over because they express obvious truths. Yup, I kept saying to myself, skimmingly.

“Fans in the know (and all guitar players) were aware that rock, like jazz, had a lineage.”

Yup.

“By the end of the year, tens of thousands of American military deserters and draft dodgers were living north of the border.”

Yup.



TO BE FAIR, THERE ARE LOTS OF THINGS I DID NOT know in these pages. *John Lennon, Yoko Ono and the Year Canada Was Cool* is a bit of a treasure trove. It’s solidly researched — full of the political, social, and cultural issues that were being discussed (endlessly, it seemed to the teenage me) in the newspapers and magazines and on the radios and televisions of the day. Names and events came back to me as I read about them. I kept saying to myself, Oh, I remember that. Marquis has caught the texture of the time, and his instinct to inspect it through the prism of Lennon and Ono is a good (and oddly revealing) one.

Assisted in his research by his wife, Marquis has drawn on a pretty impressive archive of sources — a thoroughness to which the extensive endnotes attest. He seems to have a firm grasp of the personalities, venues, and general trends of the pop music world of 1969. He’s just as confident in his broad overviews of politics, and here his staid, academic tone comes into its own. Marquis can go from what the seventeen-year-old me would have thought the coolest thing going (John Lennon on stage at the Toronto Pop Festival, let’s say) to the dullest subject in the universe (Canadian politics) without shifting gears.

Here’s a thing I did not know: Petula Clark of “Downtown” fame was performing in Montreal at the time of the bed-in. Clark visited Lennon and Ono in their hotel room, and she is one of the members of the ragtag chorus on the unusually long single “Give Peace a Chance.” (So was my late, great friend the writer Alison Gordon.) I also did not know that Jacqueline Susann, author of the bestseller *Valley of the Dolls*, happened to be in Montreal as well. Susann dropped by the suite for a drink and reported that her pyjama-clad host and hostess were a “darling couple.”

I was interested to learn that (rather like the Queen) Lennon didn’t travel with money or credit cards. He was John Lennon, and as a result he could just show up at one of the better hotels in Montreal, move with Yoko into a suite, have all the furniture immediately moved out (except for the famous bed, of course), and assume that somebody would eventually pay for everything. (Somebody — an official at the Beatles’ company, Apple Corps — eventually did.) But I was even more interested to be reminded by Greg Marquis’s *John Lennon, Yoko Ono and the Year Canada Was Cool* that there was a time in my life when that’s exactly how I thought a semi-deity such as John Lennon moved through the world.

A moment in time that I’d thought had been mummified by boomer nostalgia turns out to be full of surprises. For instance: I had never known that one Lillian Piché Shirt, a Cree woman from Alberta, gave Lennon the idea for what became his most popular song during a phone conversation she had with him while he was in Canada, of all places, in 1969. Imagine that. ▲



***This excellent biography should be required reading for foreign policy practitioners and academics alike.***

— SEN. PETER BOEHM, *International Journal*



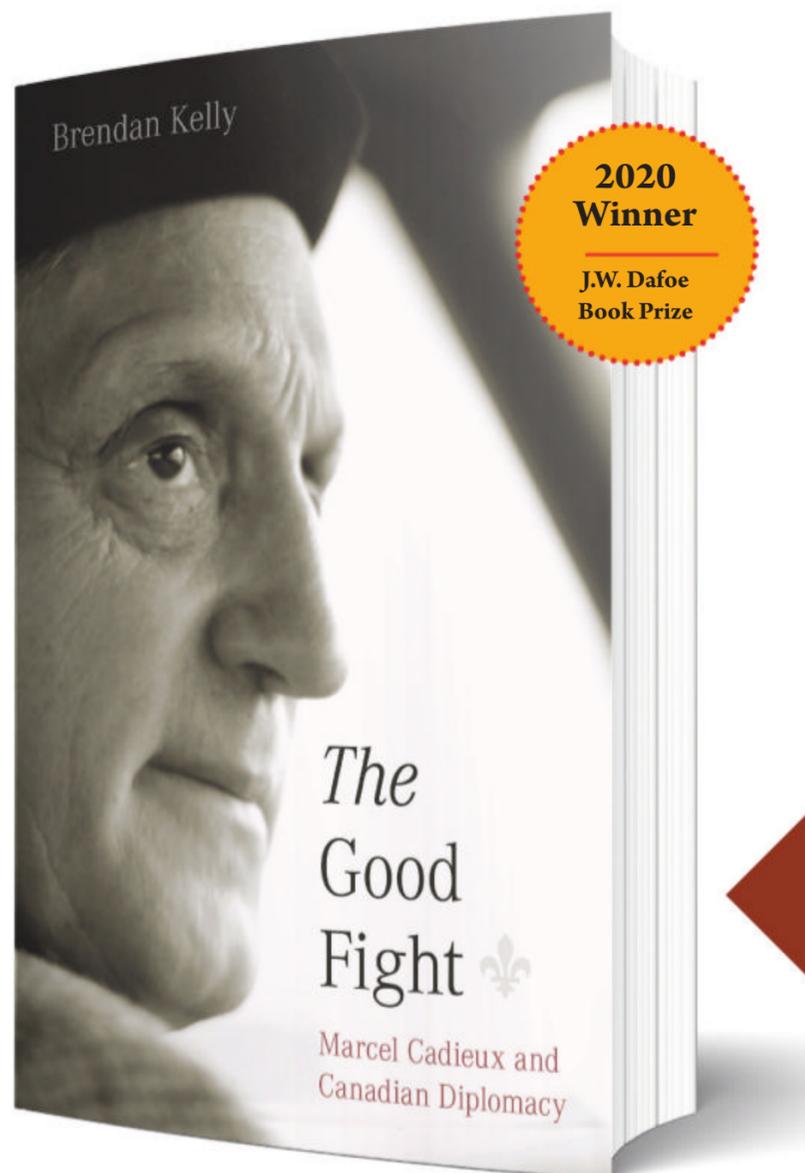
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# A Maritime Murder

The final book by Silver Donald Cameron

Frank Macdonald

## Blood on the Water: A True Story of Revenge in the Maritimes

Silver Donald Cameron

Viking

256 pages, softcover, ebook, and audiobook

**W**HEN PHILLIP BOUDREAU was murdered on June 1, 2013, by fishermen from Isle Madame, Nova Scotia, the crime generated a popular headline across the country and beyond: “Murder for Lobster!” A sensational story would always follow: a poacher caught raiding lobsters from other fishermen’s traps was shot at four times with a 30-30 rifle, his small speedboat rammed and run over, his body gaffed in the water and dragged out to more than twelve fathoms, where it was allegedly tied to an anchor and sent to the bottom of the sea.

Boudreau’s body was never recovered, but there was enough evidence, including confessions, to bring charges against the crew of the *Twin Maggies*. The lobster boat’s former owner, James Landry, and its captain, Dwayne Samson, faced second-degree murder charges. A lesser charge of accessory after the fact was lodged against Craig Landry, a deckhand. The following year, in November 2014, reporters filled the provincial courtroom in nearby Port Hawkesbury for James Landry’s trial. But one person covering the proceedings really stood out.

Silver Donald Cameron, the award-winning journalist and author, wrote about the trial as a freelancer and later distilled the events surrounding the murder into a compelling book, *Blood on the Water*, completed shortly before his death last spring. Within its pages, he sets aside the sensationalism and instead relates a tale that’s part courtroom narrative, part community profile, part assessment of Canada’s justice system as experienced by marginalized peoples. “To an Acadian or a Mi’kmaw,” he writes, “English common law presents itself as rigid, insensitive, hostile, and unrealistic — an artificial set of rules that don’t resonate with the nature of reality, or with authentic lived experience, or even with basic principles of equity and fairness.” With *Blood on the Water*, Cameron tries to convey that authentic experience as lived on the small island, just off the coast of Cape Breton.

Cameron details what he calls “Her Majesty’s Story”: how the Crown prosecutors set out the facts and evidence against sixty-five-year-old James Landry. This is the testimony and evidence that was generally reported in contemporary news accounts. But that’s not enough,

he argues, because far too little attention was paid to the extenuating circumstances that preceded the incident — the accumulated years of torment and harassment that carried little weight in the courtroom. And so *Blood on the Water* ranges far and wide, as Cameron ventures deep into the affected community and supplements the legal proceedings with conversations, interviews, anonymous voices, anecdotes, and Acadian history.

CAMERON WAS BORN IN TORONTO, IN 1937. HE grew up in Vancouver and eventually earned his doctorate at the University of London, in 1967. Then, in search of a quiet place to write, he moved in the early 1970s to D’Escousse, a village on Isle Madame, which today has a population of approximately 4,300. While his given name — Donald Cameron — might have carried weight elsewhere, it brought nothing but confusion in and around Cape Breton. To distinguish him from a myriad of other Donald Camerons in the area, he was quickly rechristened Silver Donald Cameron, for his white hair. He married into an Acadian family and came to respect a place whose respect he also came to earn.

“If a single phrase can describe the spirit of the book, it is ‘deep respect.’”

In fact, if a single phrase can describe the spirit of *Blood on the Water*, it is “deep respect.” Throughout Cameron’s telling, place is as important as the people who inhabit the story — whether it be Her Majesty’s Story or the story of James Landry, Phillip Boudreau, or anyone else participating in the drama.

Cameron scatters *Blood on the Water* with numerous Phillip-isms and “island voices.” And as the book moves from a murder trial to Isle Madame and its residents, it remains a unified narrative. The accused are not simply villains who cause local Acadians to shake their heads in dismay. In Cameron’s telling, James Landry, Dwayne Samson, and Craig Landry are as much a part of their community as their neighbours, friends, and enemies. They are fishermen caught up in the tragic consequences of a terrible decision made one fateful day.

The Acadian community presents the court with a petition, containing more than 700 names, calling for Dwayne Samson to be released on bail. It has no standing, but for Cameron its existence underscores a broader sympathy and level of trust: those signatories know that

Samson poses no danger to them. (Bail, when it does come, takes him far from Isle Madame until it’s time for his own trial.)

Not even the victim, Phillip Boudreau, is fully apart from the community, despite his minor reign of terror: “Phillip was an outlaw, but not an outcast.” Despite having bullied his way through life — threatening to burn down people’s houses, destroy their traps, steal their ATVs — Boudreau evades multiple attempts by the RCMP to arrest him, in large part because his neighbours will not betray one of their own. Yet he is no escape artist and spends nearly half his life incarcerated. (Some in the community wish he could simply be jailed during lobster season, which would greatly reduce the harm he could do.)

Cameron paints a picture of a man whom some consider a local Robin Hood — one who has been battered and abused since childhood — but also one accused of multiple rapes. And despite Boudreau’s relentless theft and destruction, the larger community mourns his death. “You hear it over and over,” Cameron writes. “It shouldn’t have happened. Nobody deserves to die that way. Those guys aren’t killers. We should have stopped it.” (There are exceptions, of course, and James Landry is among them, telling investigators, “I hope you don’t find him. Let the crabs eat him. They don’t have to put him in the cemetery. He don’t deserve a Mass.”)

Throughout *Blood on the Water*, Cameron quietly makes a case for the statement “Those guys aren’t killers.” Theft and cut traps had long plagued James Landry and other lobster fishermen. Boudreau would taunt them by moving two or three traps ahead of them, stealing their catch and waving as he cut the traps loose. In his fourteen-foot speedboat, *Midnight Slider*, he would make quick escapes, while those on lumbering vessels could hear him laughing. But his boat failed him one day, and the lives of several people and an entire community were changed.

What seems not to have changed in Isle Madame is the sense that Phillip Boudreau’s crime wave could have ended much earlier — and with much less violence — had law enforcement been more present on the island. “Whatever James and Dwayne get,” Cameron quotes one local as saying, “the last three RCMPs and the last three Fisheries officers should get the same, because it’s just as much their fault.”

Ultimately, James Landry was sentenced to fourteen years for manslaughter and Dwayne Samson to ten. Both men were paroled after three years. Underlying Silver Donald Cameron’s final book is an unsettling question: Was justice served? 

# Je me souviens de quoi?

A fresh take on the beautiful province

Graham Fraser

**La condition québécoise:  
Une histoire dépayssante**

Jocelyn Létourneau

Les éditions du Septentrion

320 pages, softcover and ebook

IT'S A VERY GOOD TIME TO READ JOCELYN Létourneau's extended essay on Quebec history. For one thing, last year was a year of anniversaries: fifty years since the October Crisis, forty years since the 1980 referendum, twenty-five years since the 1995 referendum. Reflections on these existential events stimulated a stream of articles, books, and documentaries that were coloured by regret and recrimination, that opened old wounds, and that aired old grievances. But *La condition québécoise* presents readers with a more challenging interpretation of events. Consider its subtitle alone, for the word "dépayser" means two things: to give a change of scenery and to disorient or make ill at ease.

Since 1978, Quebec licence plates have been adorned with the phrase "Je me souviens" (I remember), and there have been many discussions about what, in fact, Quebecers are being asked to recall. Decades of oppression? An ideal pre-Conquest society? Astérix's Gaulois and other heroes, who kept French-speaking societies alive under alien domination? Some elements of these stories are part of the traditional narrative that Létourneau takes on. Where some see a past in stark and simple colours of black and white, the Université Laval professor sees ambiguity, paradox, complexity, and nuance. Indeed, even the most traditional accounts of Quebec history include conflicting elements: the habitants who stayed put and farmed the land, and the coureurs de bois who paddled across the country.

Nationalists have not been amused by the book's appearance. One former FLQ member, Jacques Lanctôt, wrote in the *Journal de Montréal* that "Létourneau is trying to demonstrate that we are something other than a defeated people seeking its independence" and concluded that his analysis was "troubling rather than disorienting." *Le Devoir* sniffed he didn't have the literary quality necessary for this kind of essay.

The response is not surprising: *La condition québécoise* confronts many of the standard and comforting verities of the past. Rather than conquering the wilderness and dominating its inhabitants, the first Europeans were "in a state of dependence on the Indigenous peoples, who gave them the information they needed to travel, manage, feed, dress, protect, care for, and enrich themselves." Far from some glorious origin, this condition meant society "built itself in disorganization, uncertainty and the



A different way of lighting the history of Quebec.

difficulty of being and moving forward." The legacy of the Conquest has also meant ambiguities and contradictions: two languages, leading to confusion before the courts; the continued application of French civil law, resulting in a legal system with competing logics; a British administration "caught between its sympathies and its interests."

Even the fundamental but sometimes forgotten Quebec Act of 1774 acknowledged all this: it gave back to the Catholic Church the prerogative to collect tithes, it re-established the ownership rights of the seigneuries, and it formalized tolerance of the French-speaking majority. "In a stroke," Létourneau writes, "the equally French and Catholic character of the colony was tacitly recognized, which officialized, for better or worse, a cultural and institutional duality."

Létourneau returns again and again to this theme of duality. Yes, there have been moments of extremism and violence in the distant and recent past, but moderates have prevailed. Yes, Lord Durham's proposal to unify Upper and Lower Canada was a punitive response to the 1837–38 rebellions, but "in practice the constituted entity functioned like two separate states. . . . Canadian duality was, de facto, reinforced." And in the 1840s, Robert Baldwin, Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine, and Francis Hincks—a trio of measured reformers—worked together: "In the wake of this reasoned and reasonable complicity, based on the pragmatism of practical possibilities and the opportunism of exploitable circumstances, emerged the idea of a

moderate *canadianité* marked by *britannicité* and *francité* as a result of a historical situation that had to be accepted, willingly or not. Within this imagined identity, the Indigenous part is literally forgotten or rejected."

Another fact often neglected in the prevailing nationalist narrative: Lord Durham was followed by Lord Elgin, who signed the Rebellion Losses Bill in 1849. Despite the violence the law provoked and the burning of the parliament buildings in Montreal by angry English merchants, it confirmed what Létourneau calls "the real but limited sovereignty that the Canadian colony had acquired."

For some in the nationalist tradition, including the political scientist Denis Monière, the failure of the 1837–38 rebellions meant that established society as defined by the Catholic Church was imposed—or reimposed—in the years following the Durham Report. But for Létourneau, the pillars of traditional society were shattered: slavery, the clergy reserves, the seigneurial regime, and Métis communitarianism were all abolished by legislation or by force between then and the 1880s. And rather than seeing Confederation as the beginning of "a long winter of survival . . . a sort of depressive phase when the word of traditionalists and the Church dominates," Létourneau sees this period as "the beginning of a profound transformation of Quebec society and of a formidable change and progression of its economy."

The academic and journalistic cheering section for the Quiet Revolution has often referred to

Maurice Duplessis's tenure as premier (1936–59, with a four-year interruption during the Second World War) as the *grande noirceur* — the great darkness. Létourneau doesn't see things that way. To understand the inherent logic of the Duplessis regime, he argues, it is essential to shed the "*grande noirceur* cliché." In describing the period from 1945 to 1957, he writes of a Quebec that was "carried by the whirlwind of the North American economy. By and large, the transformation of the economic and social landscape of the province is remarkable."

As in so many other areas, Létourneau rejects the simplicity of conventional labels. "It is essential to nuance the interpretation that presents the Quiet Revolution as the result of a desire widely shared by the population to change the order of things completely," he argues. "The desire for renovation that is perceptible at the heart of Quebec society is, at the time, modest, reformist, and pragmatic." That is also the lens through which he sees the story of contemporary Quebec: a society that wants to tackle challenges in a positive and original fashion, one that has experienced "the confident decolonization of its collective imagination and identity."

Should anyone think that the referendum losses have meant an end to nationalism, Létourneau advises caution. Self-affirmation is actually "following its quiet path between the desire for autonomy and recognition on one hand, which is sovereignty, and the desire for integration and tacit agreement on the other, which is partnership." After 1995, *indépendantiste* leaders like Jacques Parizeau and Jean-Martin Aussant were concerned about the failure of the "separatist" option, which Parizeau referred to bitterly as "a field of ruins." But most Quebecers were more "resigned, exasperated, or relieved" and "seemed open to the idea of shifting their political questioning toward economic and social questions, focusing on 'the real country' rather than 'the dreamed-of country.'" It's as if they were saying sovereignty perhaps, but only "after health, the economy, the environment, gender equality, education, immigration, and the aging of the population."

As far as younger Quebecers are concerned, independence is not an ongoing project but something that has already happened: "In practice, young people consider themselves to be sovereign already." Their attention has turned from the national question to social ones; they are more diverse, inclusive, and open. Rather than disappearing, the province's distinct identity is transforming itself: "The paradoxes of the Quebec condition mean that the tendencies that are developing within it do not take extreme forms." Quebecers today are also more likely to believe in personal achievement — a break with the traditional views that seeking wealth was sinful and that the government would ultimately redistribute it anyway.

Ultimately, Létourneau's argument is that Quebec and its past are shaped by inclusion, heterogeneity, and the accumulation of influences and difference rather than separation, subtraction, and homogeneity. Quebecers should embrace their society's complexity rather than shrinking from it. This is a cheerful and optimistic vision — of a society that shuns extremes and embraces pragmatism. It is also a refreshing antidote to both referendum nostalgia and the polarization that the recent U.S. election has highlighted elsewhere on the continent. ▲

## RUMINATIONS

# The Great Cover-Up

Our pandemic wasteland

Marlo Alexandra Burks

**S**TORES ARE SELLING THEM, MOTHERS-IN-LAW are sewing them, and most people (thankfully) across Canada are wearing them. Fabrics vary: cotton is popular, though targeted advertisements are now hawking the new and ostensibly more breathable linen kind. The panoply of patterns, colours, and insignia denoting brand loyalty marries our needs (protection) to our wants (consumption). Enter our era's boldest fashion statement: the face mask.

If the essence of beauty is variety, then we might suppose that the essence of morality is simplicity. So it's no surprise that the elegantly unpretentious and disposable face mask is one of the most popular products of the day.

And, indeed, the disposable variety has great appeal. It's always clean, until it's not, and then you simply throw it away. It's readily available, too. At Canadian Tire, you pay about \$30 for a fifty-pack of the three-ply sort (reminiscent of that other three-ply COVID commodity). The purchase itself offers a little dopamine hit as you tap your card: This purchase feels good. . . . I can buy my safety. . . . I can display my virtue! And it *does* and *should* feel good to remind ourselves that we are showing solidarity and concern for the well-being of others. But there's something else happening here: the mask sings out to our "deepest consumeristic impulses," as Samanth Subramanian has pointed out in the *Guardian*. "In the absence of a drug or a vaccine, the mask is the only material protection we can buy."

Dr. Schnabel's plague mask, with its aromatics and avian beak, may have had more going for it aesthetically, but modern history is more relevant here than medieval. During the 1918–19 flu pandemic, the wearing of masks was enforceable by law in places, but, of course, there were anti-maskers then too. Even when diligently donned, masks didn't always stop H1N1. T.S. Eliot and his first wife, Vivienne, caught the virus in December 1918. Capturing something of those ailing times, the poet wrote of an "unreal city": "Under the brown fog of a winter dawn, / A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many."

Eliot's imagery reveals something about how face masks can screen us from a parlous reality: the threat seems distant, unreal, foggy (especially for the bespectacled among us). Has our sense of time's passing been blurred along with our glasses? It's strange to think that it's been almost two decades since the SARS outbreak of 2002–03, when people once again began wearing medical masks outside of hospitals — as they had in 1918. Even though SARS was declared contained on July 5, 2003, people in East Asia, especially China, Taiwan, and Japan, continued to cover their noses and mouths — now as a

form of courtesy to others and as a shield from air pollution.

Yes, we filter out the germs, and so too the particulate matter that's released by heavy industry and fossil fuels (our latter-day "brown fog"). But consider this: the carbon that pollutes the air also provides the synthetic polymer fabric for the disposable filtration systems we sport. Remember how the tobacco industry once funded lung cancer research? The dramatic irony is tortuous: Are we the characters in the play, or the audience, or both?

China produces most of the world's protective face masks. Recent videos bring to mind the optical rhythms of Weimar cinema: the undulation of comforting blue being lifted, lowered, stamped, steamed, sewn, packaged. In Rizhao, which has been in the game since 1993, the process is masterfully streamlined: The synthetic material is brought in. The non-woven material is ultrasonically welded together. The ear loops are affixed. And, along the way, everything is machine-checked before being double-checked by human hands. Each little veil is slipped into a plastic sleeve and kissed with a seal before being placed into a box for shipment.

The process is not dissimilar in Warren, Michigan, where GM has converted one of its facilities to spit out masks. Factory-line workers labour in ten-hour shifts to produce the much-needed item. Their bosses, understandably, have had to increase production. Much of the work is automated, yet human labour still plays a role. Last March and April, they couldn't meet demand. We were shocked in July, when a flurry of reports told of China's exploitation of Uighur workers — including those making our masks. But the long shifts closer to home in Warren aren't exactly appealing either.

The trip from Warren or Rizhao to Leduc or Nain is a long and costly one. The endless tolls are welded into our "disposable" protection — the price of capitalism running our machines and slicing through our waters and skies. Sleek industry is a co-creator of COVID-19; when we pull on the mask, we inadvertently put our mistakes and their consequences on full display. As a fashion statement in a consumer society, the mask is hollow. As a symbol and a warning, it is a powerful recapitulation of the exploitation of resources and labour.

Sometimes a mask's short life is cut even shorter. An ear loop breaks. Or maybe it simply gets left behind, as we shuffle our mittens and scarves and toques. It flutters to the ground or the gutter, gets caught in the brush, or blows away. For a while, we can't follow its journey. But it will surely end with the rest of our waste and broken belongings — as detritus, from which we'll need to protect ourselves in the future. ▲

# On the Banks of the Miramichi

Fire seized upon the town

Margaret Conrad

## The Miramichi Fire: A History

Alan MacEachern

McGill-Queen's University Press

288 pages, hardcover, softcover, and ebook

WITH WILDFIRES HAVING recently raged in the Amazon, California, New South Wales, Siberia, and elsewhere, the appearance of Alan MacEachern's *The Miramichi Fire* is a timely reminder of earlier conflagrations that attracted global attention. MacEachern, an accomplished environmental historian at Western University, has spent sixteen years exploring New Brunswick's experience with forest fires almost two centuries ago. His commitment to the topic shows in a book that is accessibly written, wonderfully sourced, and often a page-turner.

In 1825, the eastern part of North America experienced an exceptionally dry summer and fall. On the evening of October 7, a Friday, a fire driven by hurricane-force winds roared across northeastern New Brunswick, descending on communities along the Miramichi River, wiping out the shire town of Newcastle, scorching its sister town of Chatham, and taking at least 160 human lives and those of countless fish and wildlife in just over a day. The scope and speed of the calamity brought international attention to a colony that, at the time, was the largest exporter of timber to the British market. One of the most famous natural disasters of the nineteenth century, it inspired ballads, commentary, and sympathy on both sides of the Atlantic, produced an international outpouring of relief for survivors who had lost everything, and remains of interest to historians who count it among the first signifiers of a changing relationship between humans and their environment in the Industrial Age.

Before plunging into an analysis of the fire, MacEachern offers a chapter on the early nineteenth-century timber boom that first brought the communities of Newcastle and Chatham (amalgamated in 1995 as the city of Miramichi) to global attention. Timber was a critical resource for the British Empire, which was built economically and militarily on sea power. When the Napoleonic Wars reduced British access to Baltic timber supplies, tariffs were imposed to encourage imports from North America. New Brunswick became the quintessential "timber colony," and it continued to serve the British market in the expanding international trade following the war with France.

Much like Fort McMurray today, which serves corporate empires built on petroleum, the

Miramichi area in 1825 was a rough-and-ready resource frontier, home to a mixed population of Mi'kmaq, Acadians, and recent immigrants. Sloppy forestry practices meant that there was plenty of fuel lying around, and colonists had become accustomed to fighting flames. At the same time, slow communications — mostly word of mouth, drums, and smoke in the distance — meant that people in the path of a fire-storm might have little time to escape its fury.

As in most disasters, people pointed fingers at various culprits for setting off the inferno — human carelessness, lightning, even spontaneous combustion — but MacEachern's contextual reading of the event suggests it could



The disaster inspired ballads.

have been any or all of the above. Indeed, what became known as the "Great Miramichi Fire" was actually one of many fires, not all of them conjoined. On the same day that flames erupted along the Miramichi River, they lapped at the borders of Fredericton, destroying one-third of the town; swept through parts of Maine; and threatened areas around Montreal, where locals after the fact referred to their disaster as the "Miramichi Fire." Focusing on the nearly 16,000 square kilometres burned in northeastern New Brunswick, MacEachern argues, minimizes the impact of the many similar fires that erupted throughout the region, each one of them amplified by a climate episode that had made forested areas tinder dry.

MacEachern's description of the fire — still one of the largest ever recorded in North America — makes for gripping reading. Even the Miramichi itself offered little relief to those who fled, because in some areas the water was so low that it was impossible to submerge a human body. Scottish immigrants arriving at the mouth of the river saw the flames and immediately turned back, carrying with them some of the earliest accounts of the disaster that began appearing in British newspapers in November — accounts that helped explain the high-altitude smoke that had earlier blanketed much of the northern hemisphere.

Although timber exports from the Miramichi region dropped in 1826 and a few businesses faced bankruptcy, Newcastle was rebuilt, its rivalry with Chatham was rekindled, and the industry resumed its uneven course until British preferential tariffs were abolished in the 1840s. By then settlers were turning to farming and shipbuilding to complement the timber trade. A few decided to try their luck elsewhere, among them founders of the community of Miramichi in the Ottawa Valley. Its name was later changed to Pembroke, but a nursing home there still bears the former name.

MacEachern writes engagingly about his research, and it seems he literally went the last kilometre to flesh out his analysis. In an appendix, he provides the names of 130 victims gleaned from diaries, genealogies, newspapers, relief records, tombstones, and the website Ancestry. He reports that 90 percent of the sources turned up by his sleuthing have never before been mentioned in any account relating to the fire. In an effort to assess the long-term impact of the disaster, he even travelled to the Miramichi area, where he surveyed remote timber stands and bored holes in ancient trees to see if they contained any trace of fire scar or charcoal, but to little avail. The *lieu de mémoire* had vanished, replaced by new (and different) forests, which, like New Brunswick forests generally, have been extensively exploited by timber companies over the intervening 195 years. Today only 2 percent of the province's woodlands are more than a century old. With climate change bearing down upon us, even the mix of trees is likely to tilt from coniferous to deciduous varieties.

MacEachern laments that the Miramichi fire has been largely lost to historical memory, but, as he points out, this is not entirely true in New Brunswick, where it is featured in museums and newspaper retrospectives. The disaster also figures as a life-shaping event in Annie Proulx's novel *Barkskins*, from 2016. Yet a first-rate academic study of the disaster has been missing. Happily, we now have one that will not soon be superseded. ▲

# Paws for Thought

The costs of man's best friends

*Susan Crean*

## Unnatural Companions: Rethinking Our Love of Pets in an Age of Wildlife Extinction

*Peter Christie*

Island Press

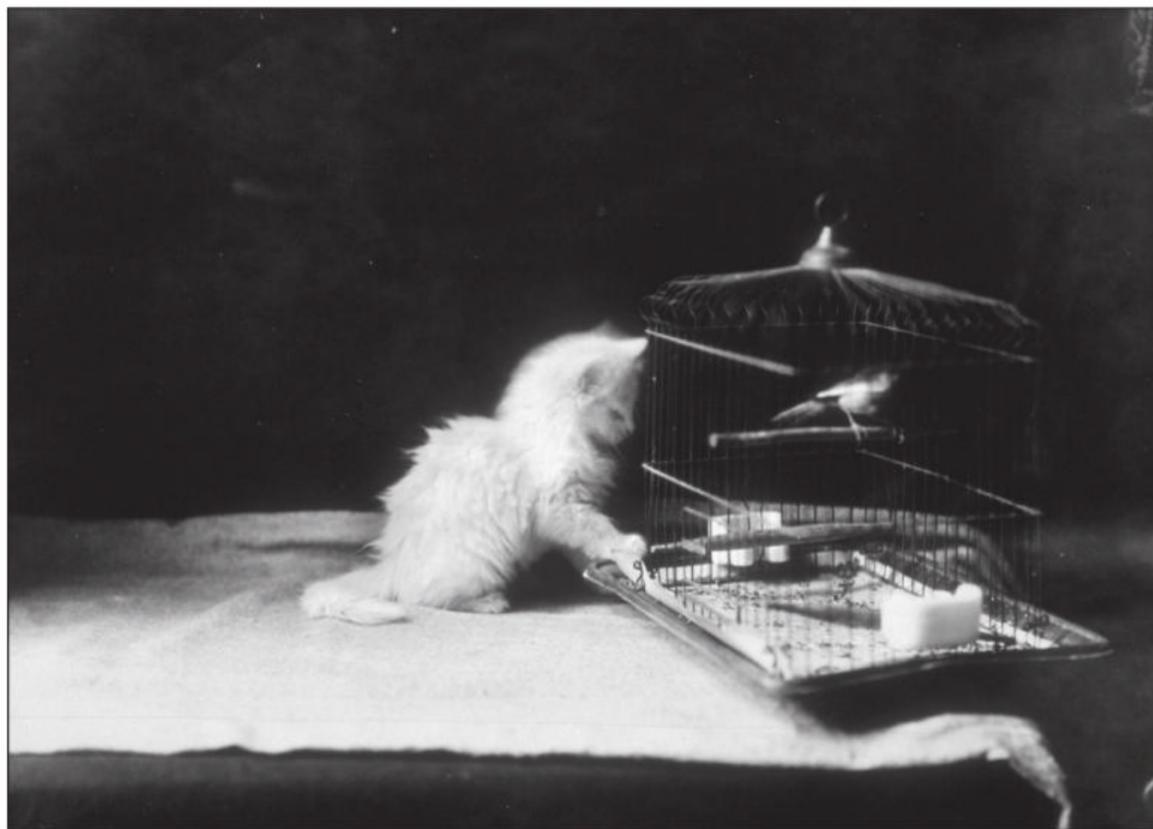
280 pages, hardcover and ebook

IT'S A GAZE THAT SPANS TIME AND SPECIES. A sea wolf, the very definition of cunning and strength, stands on a rocky ledge with a huge rhododendron in riotous bloom close behind him. The photo on my desk occupies half a page in the *Guardian Weekly* and is arresting, all the more so because the face is familiar. With colouring and demeanour like that of a German shepherd (save for the short ears and straight hind limbs), the subject could be mistaken for a dog. Because it's shot from a distance with a telephoto lens, the image dissolves the literal space between photographer and animal. The wolf appears close up — calm, curious, frozen — as two realms collide. In this intimate encounter between mammals — the watching and the watched — something suddenly shifts.

He was called Takaya, meaning "wolf" in the language of the Songhees Nation, whose territory lies in the southeastern region of Vancouver Island. The community knew him, as did a handful of others who encountered him on rare visits to Discovery Island, about a kilometre off the coast in the Strait of Juan de Fuca. First spotted there in 2012, he lived alone, surrounded by shoreline that afforded him access to harbour seal, salmon, and the occasional otter. He had adapted, abandoning the diet of black-tailed deer that has allowed coastal wolves to flourish ever since the old-growth forests were young. To flourish, but with intermissions.

Well into the 1960s, wolves were widely considered vermin and were hunted to near extinction in many parts of North America including Vancouver Island, where they were wiped out with the help of government-sponsored programs. Two decades later, though, they returned — swimming back across the Strait of Georgia to repopulate their island territories. The local population now numbers 250 (with 8,500 or so living throughout British Columbia).

It is unusual for a pack animal to live alone, as Takaya did for seven years — a long time in a wolf's life. Perhaps it was age that prompted him to leave last January. Swimming across to Victoria, he followed a route downtown through backyards and laneways before he was stopped by a tranquilizer dart and removed to the coast near Port Renfrew. Authorities hoped he'd find the terrain there familiar, but by late March 2020 he'd made his way back across the interior to Shawnigan Lake, where he was shot dead.



Implicated in the extinction of others.

News of Takaya's killing set off a debate that tended to vilify the hunter who fired the shot. Although it is not illegal to kill wolves, the deed seemed gratuitous, out of step with current ideas about the preservation of ecosystems and wildlife. Was he motivated by surprise, fear, opportunity? Was it trophy ambition? Truth is, most humans view other mammals with a certain myopia. While many of us criticize the hunting of wild animals — and their removal from natural habitats to live their lives in zoos and aquariums — we lavish decidedly unnatural lifestyles on our pets. What's more, we fail to consider the impact that those animals we consider family have on those we consider wild. This is the subject of Peter Christie's *Unnatural Companions*, a remarkable examination of our interactions with the pets we welcome in our homes. He shows how the simple act of adoption can have a dramatic impact on the world's rainforests (which, in Brazil, are being razed so cattle can be herded for dog and cat food) and oceans (with schools of forage fish, like sardines, anchovies, and herring, being wiped out for similar purposes).

Christie, a science writer based in Kingston, Ontario, also reminds us how our pets have participated in the annihilation of entire species. One oft-quoted example is the Stephens Island wren, once found on a tiny isle just off the north coast of New Zealand's South Island. A single cat, Tibbles, hunted it to extinction in a single year, 1895. We all know that since Tibbles's exploits, many other species of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish have vanished.

"We're really in a massive extinction crisis," Christie writes, quoting the Mexican ecologist Gerardo Ceballos. But what's sobering is the critical role our pets play in that ongoing crisis.

THE *GUARDIAN* CONCLUDED THAT TAKAYA HAD only himself to blame: the wolf's curiosity, explained Leyland Cecco, a Toronto-based journalist, was "built up from years of protection offered by the islands." And that, he wrote, "was his undoing." The apex predator had simply gone soft. Contrast this interpretation of animal curiosity with Christie's take on our own: for tens of thousands of years, it was obligatory to pay attention to the world around us. "If you didn't notice nature," he points out, "you didn't last long." Far from making us soft, our inquisitive nature is hard-wired: "Our insistent need to know about the life around us has been so influential in our evolutionary history that our brains naturally veer in that direction — even as we try to technologically distance ourselves from it." It has also had lethal effects on the animals, plants, and untrammelled landscapes that "are fuel for our powers of metaphor and myth, connection, and understanding."

We see this in the stories we tell our young, stories like Edward Lear's nonsense poem "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat" and Dennis Lee's inimitable "Alligator Pie." Yet what we retain from such tales wilts in the face of the great extinction we are living through now — only the sixth in the billions of years of life on earth. Sometime after 1850, the mass of humanity "eclipsed that

## The Gloves Come Off

Two disposable plastic gloves  
tumble across a field —  
identical hand mimes in  
the same wind, but doing  
different dances, almost  
clutching at the grass then  
the air, not touching or  
crossing paths. They are  
getting away — contaminated  
litter no one will touch without  
another glove. They are a perfect  
crime escaping from a silent  
heist they can never applaud.  
They have exchanged the tyranny  
of hands for the freedom  
of wind. End over end they  
flex, wave, give the finger,  
crumple, twist, dive.  
She and I watch them until  
the light turns green and we  
drive away in silence and I  
don't know what to do  
with my hands.

Jocko Benoit

*Jocko Benoit has published three poetry collections, including Real Estate Deals of the Apocalypse (Poems about Donald Trump).*

of all the wild land mammals on earth," Christie observes, and since 1900 nearly half of all mammal species have seen their ranges reduced by more than 80 percent. Our built-in need to connect with other animals has not gone away, however, so we increasingly turn to domesticated species: the cats, dogs, birds, fish, and reptiles whose birthdays we celebrate and deaths we mourn. Around the world, humans keep an estimated 113 mammals as pets, along with 585 species of birds and 485 species of reptiles. Many of the most popular animals — like parrots — are also the most endangered. The reptiles we keep, for example, "are five times more likely to be threatened with extinction" than those we don't. The multi-billion-dollar pet industrial complex, Christie reminds us, contributes to an increasingly negative feedback loop.

At last count, 41 percent of Canadian households have at least one dog and 37 percent have at least one cat, figures that have surely gone up during the pandemic. Collectively, we own over thirteen million of them — four-legged companions who always seem to be hungry. (Another ten million dogs and cats are on the streets.) Christie reminds us that, unlike the chickens our grandparents might have kept as backyard sources of protein, our best friends "are nothing but protein consumers." He cites Gregory Okin, a geographer at UCLA, who has done the calculations: "Dogs and cats — if they were their own country — are about the fifth largest global meat consumers." That puts them just behind Russia, Brazil, the United States, and China.

Tibbles may have wiped out a single species, but her feline descendants are implicated in the extinction of at least 175 others. In Australia, for example, feral cats have joined red foxes (also introduced from Europe) in the decimation of 10 percent of the continent's 273 autochthonous land mammals. Another fifth of those species are now considered threatened. In short, our dogs and cats have become roaming invasive species, whether we let them out of the house for a few hours or they spend their days on the couch. It's increasingly difficult to escape the paradox: our stand-ins for nature are helping us destroy the very thing we desire.

♦  
FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS, I LIVED ON GABRIOLA Island, one of the larger Gulf Islands located up the coast near Nanaimo. On ten acres of raw land, we built a one-room cabin, heated by a wood stove and set in a small clearing, ringed by cedar, Douglas fir, and arbutus. We were the only human residents on that part of Ferne Road, with panoramic views of Mudge Island and the Strait of Georgia, the Coast Mountains rising in the blue distance. Being in a rainforest, those acres were alive with sounds and smells and growing things: fungi and nurse logs, stinging nettle and alder saplings supple enough to bend into tent frames, tree frogs harmonizing by a nearby spring. The fir trees along the cliff would sway with the prevailing winds, like a chorus line mocking the stolid maples and their leaves the size of placemats. In early evening, the meadow would succumb to the hermit thrushes, their calls beginning tentatively, a riff of ascending notes, sharp as a pennywhistle and mysterious as mercury. The air would crackle with the expanding sound as one call became three and then six in a surrounding circle.

As Takaya would learn years later, islands are an easy reach for creatures that fly and those that swim — wolves and cougars, otters and beaver, all of them known if not often seen around Gabriola. Domestic cats, however, don't swim. Unlike the wounded band-tailed pigeon that took refuge in the alder sapling by the cabin one spring, scrappy toms can't get to Gabriola on their own. But one day, a stray emerged from the woods accompanied by a female about to have kittens. When she and her five newborns left us — for the vet and then for homes around the island — he lingered. We didn't feed him at first, but we did leave the window ajar so he could visit. Sometimes we would disappear for a time, always to find him still around when we returned. He seemed at ease with the arrangement, and the feeling was mutual.

This black and white tuxedo cat, a deft hunter and patient confidant, came armed with a sense of humour. In the lamplight shadows, we would watch him with an intensity we rarely gave the darkened forest itself. Once, for his amusement, I pretended to swallow a dead mouse. He fell for the trick and, a few evenings later, returned with two mice stuffed in his jaws — one for me and one for him. When he first arrived, we were rereading *Paradise Lost*, enjoying Milton's tart humour and noting how Lucifer delivered insights as well as bons mots about the superiority of Hell. The fallen angel's name seemed to suit our earthly trickster, who even then struck me as too clever by half. And who, I now have to admit, was an environmental disaster.

Back then, I loved that Lucifer lived *au naturel*, without our having to supply commercial cat

food. But there's no getting around the fact that he was a killing machine — small mammals, reptiles, insects — with an ecological footprint much, much larger than his little paws would suggest.

When we moved east, we brought Lucifer to live in Toronto, to a two-storey semi that backed onto a park in South Riverdale. He remained an outdoor cat who came inside as it suited him, and he found new hunting grounds upon his arrival. But he also grew fond of kibble and, eventually, tinned seafood, even though mousers aren't natural fishers. (Try telling that to Australian cats, who, Christie notes, average thirty pounds' worth of seafood each year.)

Though he had access to that park, Lucifer didn't thrive in Toronto. Like Takaya, he died before he grew old.

♦  
WHEN WE TELL THE STORY OF PEOPLE AND THEIR pets, we often miss the true ending and, quite frankly, the true beginning. We think we know where to get pets — the breeders, the pound, the various rescue organizations — but few of us see the way the global supply chain actually operates. When we factor in all of them — the snakes, the gerbils, and, yes, the dogs and cats — we have 82 million animals sharing Canadian homes. That's more than twice our human population. And each year, six to eight million of them end up in shelters.

People and domestic animals have an ancient connection based on mutual benefit and companionship. The association was originally defined by work, which dogs could often be trained to do. The job of cats — containing the rat population in granaries — was self-assigned, the work being its own reward (as Lucifer liked to remind me). But despite this primeval connection, we know that to experience nature requires something more than visiting the local dog park or roughing it on the Gulf Islands with a humorous stray. To actually hear the planet talking, as it warns us of what's to come, we need to reframe how we see animals — animals like Takaya and Lucifer both. "Pet ownership and a love of wildlife are both less like a hobby and more like a state of mind," Christie writes. "It's an emotional and psychological belief system." Adoring pets and admiring wildlife are not mutually exclusive, he reminds us, but we need to reconfigure those acts in ways we may have forgotten.

Personally, I always configured my relationship with Lucifer as an off-grid and non-commercial one. We had a pact, he and I, more than he had an owner or I had a pet. *Unnatural Companions* shows how even that arrangement was magical thinking at best.

♦  
BESIDE ME AT MY DESK IS ANOTHER PHOTO — with another gaze that spans time and species. Familiar slanted eyes of yesterday stare through the camera into the present. They look beyond me and into a garden that hosts the mischief of rats who recently evicted a scurry of chipmunks, who nonetheless continue to raid the bird feeder while dodging incoming cardinals, chickadees, and sparrows. They watch as a lone sharp-shinned hawk, the neighbourhood's current apex predator, lands high in the naked branches of a Norway maple.

I've looked into Lucifer's eyes often since those days on Gabriola Island. Now I have to wonder: Are we finally seeing each other differently? ▲

# An Arctic Fable

Once upon the melting ice

*Sandra Martin*

## Ice Walker: A Polar Bear's Journey through the Fragile Arctic

*James Raffan*

Simon & Schuster Canada

192 pages, hardcover and ebook

**A**S A PARENT, I REMAIN A DUD WHEN it comes to shopping with my fashionista daughter and playing sports with my athletic son. What I loved, when they were younger, was reading with them — especially snuggling together in bed with chapter books long after they knew how to read by themselves. We had ground rules: no skipping ahead (I still blush at being caught in the act more than once by a wakeful offspring) and, most important, the choices had to appeal to both adult and child. I wasn't going to waste my time with a series like the *Baby-Sitters Club*; my kids could indulge in those guilty pleasures by themselves. Instead, we plunged into Lloyd Alexander, Susan Cooper, Philip Pullman, L. M. Montgomery, Janet Lunn, Farley Mowat, and C. S. Lewis. It's a tradition that I have maintained with my grandchildren.

James Raffan's *Ice Walker* is a happy addition to our reading list. That is not to suggest it is too elementary for grown-ups — not at all. Like the best multi-generational books, it creates charismatic animals, thrums with an enticing narrative pace, and instills an imperative moral choice. *Ice Walker* is elegant in its telling, heart-breaking in the dangers its characters face, and compelling about our shared existential threat. It belongs to the naturalist genre that includes Fred Bodsworth's *Last of the Curlews*, a haunting tale about a lonely migratory bird, the Eskimo curlew, on the edge of extinction and in a desperate search for a mate. As generations of readers know, a budding romance ends in tragedy when a farmer looks overhead, sees the couple swooping and trilling in a courtship ritual, and callously hauls out a loaded shotgun.

Nobody talked much about climate change when Bodsworth published *Last of the Curlews* in the mid-1950s. Back then, the threat was greedy hunters killing for adventure. In that sense, Raffan inhabits a different milieu than his literary predecessor. The son of Scottish immigrants, he grew up studying and exploring the natural world, travelling from sea to sea to sea by canoe, snowshoe, sailboat, and even icebreaker, and honing his skills as a geographer, explorer, and raconteur in books, articles, speeches, and podcasts. A modern naturalist who wears his erudition lightly, Raffan is a former curator of the Canadian Canoe Museum, in Peterborough, Ontario, an international fellow of the Explorers Club, past chair of the Arctic Institute of North



Survival in a fast-changing world.

America, and a former governor of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society.

With *Ice Walker*, Raffan introduces us to Nanurjuk — or Nanu — a seven-year-old polar bear who roams the shores of Hudson Bay north of Churchill, Manitoba. For thirty-six months, with the watchfulness of a 24-7 camera, we follow her through the Canadian Arctic, learning fascinating details about her characteristics and her habitat. Early on, Raffan explains how bumps, or papillae, in the hair-covered soles of Nanu's feet are a "two-way communication system." They sense crucial differences in the texture and temperature of the ice, and they send out messages, through her skin glands, to other bears crossing her tracks. They signal that she is healthy and ready to mate.

Nanu's first pregnancy ended in the stillbirth of two cubs; she had not gained enough weight to nurture the fetuses. Now she must mate successfully and hunt more ruthlessly; then she must find a secure den in which to bear and feed her young.

◆  
IN TELLING US NANU'S STORY, RAFFAN REVEALS THE underlying theme of his book: for many thousands of years, polar bears and polar people have cohabited in one of the most unforgiving environments on the planet, largely because of their common ability to hunt and harvest seals. It is this "triad of bear, hunter, and seal — and the ice on which they live — that is central to the survival of the Arctic world." Raffan insists that each of them has "the right to thrive and to be cold."

If only the ice today were as reliable as it was when Nanu was a cub. Her mother knew a spring world "of vast sky and ice with occasional leads of open water." But Nanu "lives in a world with wet skies, more water and altogether less ice." The climate crisis is a danger not just to one polar bear but to all of us, of course. The "drip, drip, drip of melting pressure ridges might as well be the tick, tick, tick of accelerated time in a fast-changing world," Raffan writes. He describes an environment where almost everything is powered by diesel, a dangerous pollutant that can be devastating to the "feathers, skin or coat of a seabird or mammal."

Thanks to Raffan's storytelling skills, we engage readily in Nanu's struggles to survive, along with the successful birth of her cubs, Sivu and Kingu. They are as real to us as a litter of kittens or puppies born to the family pet. They tumble, they fight, they snuggle into their mother's belly when they want to nurse or sleep. And eventually they all emerge from the safety of the den and move into the lengthening daylight of a new and changing world, one in which high-powered rifles have replaced harpoons and noisy, smelly snowmobiles have mostly supplanted dogs and sleds.

As cute as the two cubs are, they are also an encumbrance. In the same way that toddlers slow down a woman trying to earn a living, Sivu and Kingu often distract Nanu in her hunt for seals, necessary to replenish her fat stores so that she can protect her cubs from marauders — including wolves and other bears.

## Fever

No matter her need, she is not allowed  
to be with him, can't hold the hand  
that jerks with each breath the ventilator  
pumps. Even if she could talk her way past  
the guards, she has no code to unlock  
the elevator, no script to hand the nurses.

She may as well shelter at the cottage  
they built together, every surface bears  
his touch. She can't sleep, the bed too wide.  
Wraps his robe around her, goes to watch  
the storm gather. Pine needles under bare feet,  
the dock boards blood warm where she has  
waited while he butterflies out to the lake's middle,  
the rhythmic bob of his head as he returns.

Sheet lightning makes this a still  
from a black and white film, *woman  
on the edge*, hair flying, arms spread  
to embrace or ward off the clouds  
that would drown her. Hugs herself  
in his sleeves. Thunder moans low  
on the far side of the hill. The first rain  
licks the salt from her cheeks, teases  
her lips open.

Betsy Struthers

*Betsy Struthers has written three mystery novels, a collection of short fiction, and nine books of poetry, including Still, which won the 2004 Pat Lowther Memorial Award.*

By adopting a documentary approach, Raffan largely resists the temptation of anthropomorphism, so beloved by naturalists, although he does make occasional comparisons between bears and humans. Early on, for example, he points out that Nanu's back feet step perfectly into the imprints left by her front ones, thereby

saving energy that she would otherwise need for all four to break through the deep snow. The impression is that "she is on just two legs, upright like a woman."

Still, Nanu is not chatty like Charlotte, the arachnid spelling champ created by E. B. White, or zany like Mutt, the Dennis the Menace

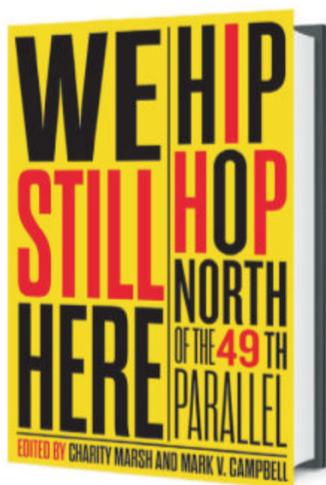
wannabe in Farley Mowat's *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be*. No, Nanu is a *real* polar bear, or so she seems, a notion that is reinforced by captivating black and white photographs.

But is there something wrong here? *Ice Walker* is promoted as non-fiction, yet is it actually a novel in camouflage? Anticipating this tension between genres, Raffan explains in his author's note why he, a writer who began his career as a marine biologist, "would be stretching the bounds of creative nonfiction with a story about a made-up bear." The scientist in him couldn't invent dialogue to put in Nanu's mouth or include anything that he didn't know to be accurate. But that left a gap between data and comprehension, facts and persuasion. So he created ursine characters with names and personalities and invited us to enter their world in the hope that we would share his apocalyptic vision.

Raffan has pre-empted questions about authenticity, a contentious issue in naturalist writing in Canada since the mid-1990s. That's when the journalist John Goddard accused Mowat of "selling fiction as non-fiction" and having "broken a trust with his readers," with such Arctic-focused books as *People of the Deer* and *Never Cry Wolf*. The magazine *Saturday Night* published Goddard's devastating critique as its May 1996 cover story, with an illustration of an impish Mowat with a Pinocchio nose. The article unleashed a scandal that hounded the beloved and best-selling author until his death in 2014.

Thirty years ago, I was both shocked by Goddard's accusations and troubled by Mowat's justifications that the larger truth mattered more than a pedantic recounting of the evidence. Mowat was right to raise the alarm in the 1950s about starvation among the Ihalmiut people, because Ottawa had forcibly relocated them away from their traditional hunting grounds. He was also correct in defending wolves from the bad rap they had been given in popular literature as nothing but ruthless predators. But I wish he had explained up front the rationale behind his passionate storytelling. That's why I appreciate Raffan and his author's note about blurring some of the lines between fact and fiction. I also know I will be prodding my grandchildren for their thoughts once we have finished *Ice Walker*. After all, arguing about books is one of the great pleasures of reading them together. ▲

## Companions for Winter Hibernation



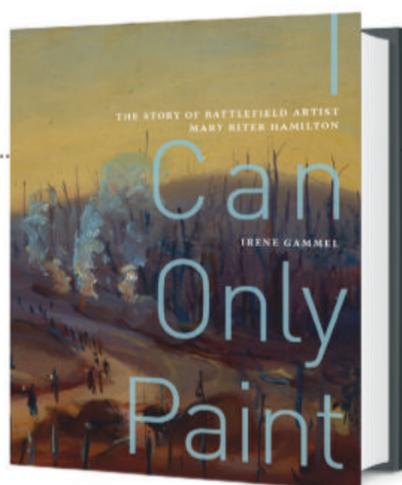
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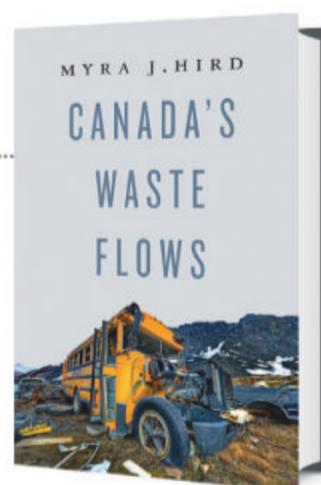


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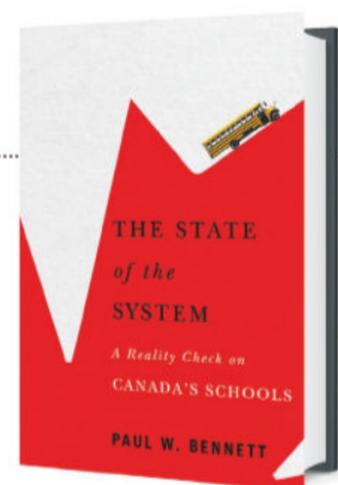
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# Lives Less Ordinary

Peter Mansbridge's unsung heroes

J. D. M. Stewart

**Extraordinary Canadians:  
Stories from the Heart of Our Nation**

*Peter Mansbridge, with Mark Bulgutch*

Simon & Schuster Canada

304 pages, hardcover and ebook

**W**HAT MAKES FOR AN "EXTRAORDINARY Canadian"? It's a question that has been asked, both implicitly and explicitly, for a long time.

Some answers come in the form of public displays, such as statues and the faces that appear on our banknotes. Revering a person or group in bronze, whether it is Sir John A. Macdonald, Terry Fox, or the Famous Five, is a statement about who we feel made an extraordinary contribution to the country. The same goes for our currency. Viola Desmond, who battled racial injustice in the 1940s, earned the most recent honour, in 2018, when she appeared on the award-winning \$10 bill.

In publishing, the question has been asked more explicitly. Many readers will remember the books published by Penguin Canada, beginning in 2011, with the title *Extraordinary Canadians*. The series was edited by the public intellectual John Ralston Saul and featured short biographies of well-known figures — from Glenn Gould and Nellie McClung to Maurice "Rocket" Richard and Big Bear. Saul, not surprisingly, expounded on the notion of extraordinary Canadians.

"How do civilizations imagine themselves?" he asked, philosophically. "One way is for each of us to look at ourselves through our society's most remarkable figures." For him, those were the "rebels, reformers, martyrs, writers, painters, thinkers, political leaders." They were the ones who laid the foundation for a country.

Lester B. Pearson, Wilfrid Laurier, Pierre Trudeau — they're all in the Penguin series. And no one will argue about the contributions they made to the building of this country. Nevertheless, as Saul noted, "Civilization is not a collection of prime ministers."

Seven years after Penguin published its seventeenth and final *Extraordinary Canadians* instalment comes a book from Peter Mansbridge and Mark Bulgutch, and although the title is familiar, it prompts a fresh look at the question of who is extraordinary. There are no prime ministers to be found here, nor would most readers recognize the names of those whose first-person accounts make up the book. Matt Devlin, the television play-by-play caller for the Toronto Raptors, is perhaps the best-known personality, but he may also be the least extraordinary of the bunch.

Mansbridge's take on extraordinary Canadians is manifestly different from Saul's. In fact, his book is really about ordinary individuals who have done extraordinary things. "'Hero' is a description that covers a wide range of possibilities and there are a lot of stories that fall in that space between dying for your country and winning for your country," he writes. "That's what this book is about. It's about people who have put the lives of Canadians of all walks of life, first. That's what being a hero means to me."

As I read about these men and women, a certain phrase kept popping into my mind: *Desiderantes meliorem patriam* — they desire a better country. It is impossible not to be impressed, humbled, and awed by the contributions of these Canadians who come from many different parts of the country, even if they're not all Order of Canada inductees. Courage, determination, passion, overcoming adversity — these themes run throughout the book.

*Extraordinary Canadians* is not a love letter to the country, though it will certainly leave readers uplifted, even if both the successes and the failures of Canada are exposed. The individuals Mansbridge includes have overcome racism,

**"It is impossible not to be impressed, humbled, and awed by these Canadians."**

sexism, ableism, and homophobia, to name just a few. Nadine Caron, the first female Indigenous general surgeon, talks about her achievements but notes they came with "sharp reminders about the divide that still exists within our country." She appreciates Stephen Harper's 2008 apology to residential school survivors but needs something more: "something that's somehow deeper, more personal and therefore more meaningful."

Gina Cody, who emigrated from Iran in 1979, earned a doctorate in engineering from Concordia University, in Montreal, and led one of Canada's most successful companies owned by a woman. Yet she was often reminded of her sex: "I can't count how many times my executive assistant would transfer a call to me and, hearing my voice, the guy would ask, 'Can I please speak to your boss?' That kind of stuff never ended."

To be extraordinary usually means persevering in the face of challenges, and the stories here prove it.

Mansbridge's book is currently a bestseller, perhaps no surprise considering his reputation as the long-time news anchor of the CBC's

*The National*. But readers expecting to go inside his head or to get deep insights into the country or the nature of extraordinary Canadians will be disappointed. The book lacks an extended rumination from Mansbridge, someone who knows the country, its history, and its citizens exceedingly well. His introduction to these seventeen stories is a mere three and a half pages — not enough to do a deep dive on a worthwhile topic.

A few other quibbles: There is no context for where or when the interviews took place. How did Mansbridge and Bulgutch land on these particular compatriots? Where did they hear of them? How did they make their final selections? What was Mansbridge's role compared with that of Bulgutch, a former senior editor on *The National*? These may seem minor points to some, but Mansbridge notes that "we interviewed each person at length, for hours at times, to capture their experiences in detail. They shared everything." Adding dates, locations, and a brief note for those talks would have added texture to each story as well as some context.

There is also something of a slapdash element to the book besides the shallow introduction: the mediocre quality of the photos; the occasional American spelling; the reference to William Lyon Mackenzie on one page (incorrect) and William Lyon Mackenzie King (correct) on another. A bit more care on the editing and production side might have given the book heft enough to match its \$37 price tag.

Still, to a very large degree, *Extraordinary Canadians* is about what makes a great country or even a great community. The multicultural mosaic of people assembled here truly represents the Canada of today. It reminds us that our society will thrive only if there are people leading and persevering away from the spotlight — whether it is a young woman raising awareness of ostomy surgeries or a former schoolteacher who founded a call-in service to support lesbians in Newfoundland and Labrador. Readers can be thankful that we have so many citizens who are working hard, making sacrifices, and showing incredible determination and courage in their efforts.

While the extraordinary Canadians selected by John Ralston Saul are undeniably important to the success of this country, we should never lose sight or appreciation of the many others, from all regions of Canada, who have made — and continue to make — indelible contributions to who we are. As Mansbridge puts it, "Their lives may not result in medals, Heritage Minutes, or new names for schools, but then again, they might." ▲

# Her Little Black Book

Barbara Amiel doesn't give a damn

*Kelvin Browne*

**Friends and Enemies: A Memoir**

*Barbara Amiel*

Signal

608 pages, hardcover and ebook

**B**ARBARA AMIEL AND HER BOYFRIEND Sam Blyth walked into the stylish Yorkville establishment and every head turned to stare. They were beautiful and tanned — his shirt rakishly unbuttoned and her flamboyant Pucci dress low cut, with a confident display of décolletage. They had a European cool and radiated sexuality seldom seen forty years ago in uptight Toronto. As people gawked, the pair waved to my host and moved toward our table. They're movie stars, I said to myself, certainly people who live in a different world than me. I was just a nerdy WASP, barely able to say hello. I've since met Barbara Amiel several times, but I never really knew much about her, save for the constant stream of gossip that a high-profile personality like hers generates. Her new memoir, *Friends and Enemies*, proves that appearances aren't always deceiving.

The world Amiel describes isn't the world of a Jackie Collins novel, even though it has similar ingredients: sex, money, ambition, fabulous houses, fancy people with even fancier titles. Actually, Amiel's compelling reportage of life at the top wouldn't make for a Collins best-seller, because there's too much pain and chaos. Instead, *Friends and Enemies* is more an inadvertent cautionary tale about, among other things, the illusory world of celebrity, the motivating power of envy, and the impossibility of freeing yourself once you are ensnared in a legal system that can be unjust. Those who read for escape may not want such a potent reminder of the contradictions that even the most introspective, psychoanalyzed, and self-lacerating among us can't fully reconcile with their life choices.

At the outset, Amiel warns her story is a rocky road: she describes herself as "a misshapen piece of work" and an object of derision. "By now there has been sufficient material published in newspapers, magazines, books, and film and television scripts concerning my husband and myself that I am genuinely and though God knows I hate to use the word, 'authentically' unsure of what I am," she writes. "I can't say whether it is after the fifteenth or the fiftieth negative article or the third or the fourth chapter of one of the half-dozen books that dissect you with a hacksaw, but at some point you leave outrage behind and a worm constricts your chest." What motivates her to share six hundred pages' worth of her eighty-year story is nothing other than a desire "to set the record straight,

to rationalize the whole endeavour by clinging to the notion that even imperfect, highly flawed people can be interesting and perhaps their experiences might help someone" (though she admits that she's no "Florence Nightingale for the confused-female set").

To simply peruse the index of *Friends and Enemies* is to get a sense of what's coming: pregnancy and abortion; financial and legal troubles; false allegations against; seizure of personal items; codeine reliance; depression; feminism; pets, aggression of; plastic surgery; reputation as a bitch; reputation as gold digger; smearing of; thinness as ideal; Anglican baptism; and anti-Semitism.



Appearances aren't always deceiving.

BARBARA JOAN ESTELLE AMIEL WAS BORN IN December 1940, in England, and spent the war years at her grandparents' house in Chorley Wood, Hertfordshire — "a safe place for a Jewish child in 1940s Europe." When the war ended, she moved with her mother and baby sister back to their "battle-scarred house in Hendon, in North West London." Her parents divorced; her mother remarried a few years later and eventually gave birth to Barbara's two half-brothers. The reconstituted family immigrated to Canada and settled in Hamilton.

"If I adored my new stepfather, which I did, I worshipped my own father," Amiel writes. "So tall, broad-shouldered, handsome and very funny, revelling in my good school reports.

The excitement of our rare custody visits was so intense that I almost never slept the night before." She seldom saw him after her parents separated, and never again after she left England. She was fifteen when her mother announced her father was dead: "He killed himself. . . . He went mad. . . . I expect you'll go mad too." A lawyer, he had embezzled client funds, couldn't replace the money, and committed suicide, leaving his new wife and their two children "quite destitute."

Amiel learned of her father's death over the phone; she wasn't living at home at the time. Her stepfather thought it best that she stay in rented rooms, because she periodically upset her suicidal mother. So she had parted from her family "involuntarily," starting at age fourteen, but she came to "quite happily [rent] different rooms till my last year in high school." She took odd jobs, too, to keep herself afloat: "Children are malleable and take life as it comes. No one told me how lives were supposed to be, and so I didn't feel shortchanged."

Despite the rooming-house existence and part-time jobs, Amiel tried to play the part of an average teenager. She spent time with friends and boyfriends and edited her high school magazine. And in 1959, she got herself to the University of Toronto: "I'd scrambled together the first payment of my college tuition and three months of residence fees with my usual confidence that I'd find a job to pay for the rest." In that first year, she met Gary Smith, who was studying law at Osgoode Hall. For her birthday, he gave her an opal ring: "My engagement was accidental. . . . A ring could mean nothing else." She dreaded marriage and worried about the suffocating role of a Jewish wife.

Then came Robert Hershorn: from a wealthy Jewish family in Montreal, he both sold and used heroin. Amiel found the outlaw in him appealing — the antithesis of steadfast Gary Smith. She admits she already had her own addiction — a codeine habit that began as a teenager — but she had no interest in smack. She began a muddled affair with Hershorn and delayed her nuptials: "The evening that was supposed to be my wedding night was spent in Times Square with Leonard Cohen holding one arm of mine and Robert the other." A month or two later, she did marry Smith. It lasted seven months. "We parted amiably and with no need of a financial settlement," she recalls. "I was working at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and could afford my rooming house, which, with one marriage behind me, was where I was again."

Over eighteen months at the CBC, she went from filing clerk to on-camera interviewer and story editor. Then, around 1968, she met the film producer George Bloomfield and moved

to New York. Life with him alternated in rapid succession from the high to the low, depending on whether he had movie work. In 1972, she “felt it was all right to leave him,” as he was directing a film and her departure could be relatively guilt free. She was motivated, because she was in love with a man she had dated with “complete indifference” five years prior, the CBC radio producer George Jonas: “After we married” — in 1974 — “the violence, though very infrequent, was material and culminated in my receiving a dislocated jaw that required the ‘I bumped into a door’ explanation for the disbelieving emergency doctor.” Despite their volatile relationship, Jonas and Amiel wrote a book together, *By Persons Unknown: The Strange Death of Christine Demeter*, which received positive reviews and gave them some financial security, however briefly.

The couple divorced in 1979, when Amiel “decided to leave no cliché unturned, oh God, and, fulfilling Jonas’s worst fears, became infatuated with the Younger Man.” The new beau was just out of university and was the “altogether so physically perfect” Sam Blyth. Having no money, they moved into a cheap, rodent-infested apartment recently vacated by Blyth’s university friends: “His former co-residents left behind thousands of fleas from their cats but sadly not the cats themselves.” By then, Amiel was writing her column for *Maclean’s* as well as working for the *Toronto Sun* and CTV. Soon the new couple were widely criticized for blundering into Mozambique without visas. They spent ten days in jail. The Canadian government was uninterested in freeing them, and eventually the British consul secured their release. They lasted two years.

Despite the ongoing relationship turmoil, Amiel’s career moved ahead with high-profile *Maclean’s* columns and guest appearances on *Front Page Challenge* and other TV shows: “I was asked to take positions on all predictable topics because Canadian television couldn’t find another female journalist with long hair and a bust to talk in favour of God, against affirmative action and strongly against a state policy of multiculturalism and enforced human rights tribunals.” Then, seemingly out of the blue, she was offered the job of *Toronto Sun* editor, even though she and the paper “were not compatible in any way whatsoever, apart from a certain determination to shock and a sturdy belief in a Lockean individualism.”

Before her third marriage, Amiel’s fiancé gave her his psychiatric evaluation. It read, in part, that he had “difficulty trusting and making a full emotional commitment with people, especially women.” Such a revelation might have deterred others from tying the knot with David Graham, a wealthy Canadian businessman domiciled in London, but Amiel moved to London to be with him and started writing for the *Times*. There she became well known for her forthright views. Marriage number three was doomed. Graham often travelled for business and did not give up his pre-nuptial girlfriends. The final straw, though, was Amiel’s relationship with the book publisher and inveterate party giver George Weidenfeld.

While extraordinarily well connected with the British upper crust, Lord Weidenfeld was short, plump, and twenty-one years older than

Amiel. This was not to be marriage number four, although he proposed repeatedly, especially after her comment that “holding him is like clutching death” was widely repeated. The breakup with Graham was “a stew of hysteria” and culminated in a suicide attempt by Amiel. After a brief reconciliation — on the condition that she return what was left of her divorce settlement — Amiel was once again looking for a new home. Her London acquaintances were baffled: she was a smart woman who had divorced a rich man, with little to show for it.

Next came a relationship with the Oscar-winning screenwriter and novelist William Goldman. And though the relationship “had elements apart from true love,” Amiel was not to be his Princess Bride. Then there was yet another commitment-challenged man, there was clinical depression, there was another suicide attempt, there was the constant issue with money — yet Amiel kept churning out those columns. In fact, throughout her life, work has been a solace, even at fourteen. And though it wasn’t the right time for another new romance... Conrad Black purchased the *Telegraph* and started spending more time in London. Black and Amiel had met in Toronto, and it had not been love at first sight, at least for her. When he announced that he was separating from his wife, Amiel commented, “The girls will be falling out of the trees for you.” To which he responded, “Don’t restrain yourself, Barbara.” After many meetings — but before a first kiss — Black proposed marriage.

## “It’s a taunt that seems relevant to many in her life, going way back.”

This would be a good place to end the story if it were a Jackie Collins novel — the heroine finally finding true love, not to mention wealth, social prominence, and houses in New York, London, Palm Beach, and Toronto. Instead, this is where the heroine rises to stratospheric prominence, so that she can fall from spectacular heights.

BARBARA AMIEL CAME INTO A FRENETIC AND ESTABLISHED social life when she married Black, in July 1992. But there were homes to decorate, staff to hire, dinners to give — all things Amiel claims she was unequipped to handle. Only because of a lifelong interest in clothes was the upgrade to couture of interest. (And though she made the occasional mistake, she also made the occasional best-dressed list.)

In New York, Amiel’s female friends were known as the Group — a select few who dominated the social columns. Early on, the Group reminded her of a famous Duchess of Windsor bon mot: you can never be too rich or too thin. The women were like Truman Capote’s Swans, the name he gave to the most stylish and famous socialites of the 1960s, who appeared to glide effortlessly through life while concealing the constant and strenuous effort — those ungainly webbed feet moving as fast as they could. Amiel paddled quickly to catch up.

In August 2002, *Vogue* featured Amiel — stunning and age-defying, a sixty-one-year-old who had come to appreciate expensive

jewellery — in its annual Age Issue. On their own, the photographs of extraordinary entitlement could be criticized as attention seeking, but not much else. But they were coupled with a bold quote — “I have an extravagance that knows no bounds” — and caused an explosion of derision. Amiel meant the comment to be self-deprecating, but her intent wasn’t easily understood. And that’s ironic, considering she didn’t consume conspicuously *enough* for the Group (just too conspicuously for everyone else). The Group’s de facto leader, Jayne Wrightsman, an admired philanthropist and noted grande dame who spent far greater sums but didn’t advertise it, told Amiel, “Anna should have protected you more.” Of course, Anna Wintour wanted to sell magazines. And that lack of protection is something of a recurring theme of *Friends and Enemies*, perhaps coupled with an unwillingness to accept protection at the same time.

It’s probable the ensuing legal nightmare for Black would have happened regardless, but Amiel worries she helped ignite the firestorm of litigation and charges. Was it a folie à deux? Regardless, Amiel gave the mob a slogan — a “let them eat cake” gaffe — to sum up why the lord and lady should be pilloried. Like annoyed swans, the Group turned their backs on Amiel, especially when Black came under legal siege in the early 2000s (“A rockslide begins in silence,” she observes). While her put-downs of fickle friends are reminiscent of Tom Wolfe’s *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, they are

far more humorous — and they pale in comparison with the acerbic barbs she directs toward Black’s prosecutors, persecutors, and the legal profession in general.

WITH *FRIENDS AND ENEMIES*, BARBARA Amiel reprises many of her — as it’s often expressed — extreme right-wing

views. Many of her past opinions would never see print in today’s cancel culture, and if they did, she’d be out of a job. So many have taken pleasure in castigating her (and her husband, for that matter). So many have found them guilty of a myriad of character flaws — pomposity, snobbery, wilful naïveté, arrogance. Yet the peanut gallery has looked the other way when equally imperfect characters espouse woke attitudes.

Amiel literally lists her friends and enemies at the end of the book. The list of friends is long (we should all be so lucky), while the roll call of enemies is surprisingly brief. Still, she aims her final remarks at them: “I’m going to try to enjoy the remaining time left to me. And bugger off to the whole damn lot of you. We’re still here. You lost.” It’s a taunt that seems relevant to many in her life, going way back.

When considering the merits of a memoir or autobiography, does one evaluate the writing or the life? And how can you judge a writer’s impression of her own life anyway? Despite the confessional nature of her book, it sometimes seems as if Amiel has only fleeting insight into what’s driven her more extreme behaviours: the attention-deprived childhood, the longing for an idolized but remote father. On one point, though, Barbara Amiel knows about herself what I knew right away in that restaurant forty years ago: this is a woman who lives in a different world. She’s also a woman who has survived a world that destroys most everyone else. ▲

# The Colossus

Notes on our twelfth prime minister

*J. L. Granatstein*

**The Unexpected Louis St-Laurent:  
Politics and Policies for a Modern Canada**

*Edited by Patrice Dutil*

UBC Press

540 pages, hardcover and ebook

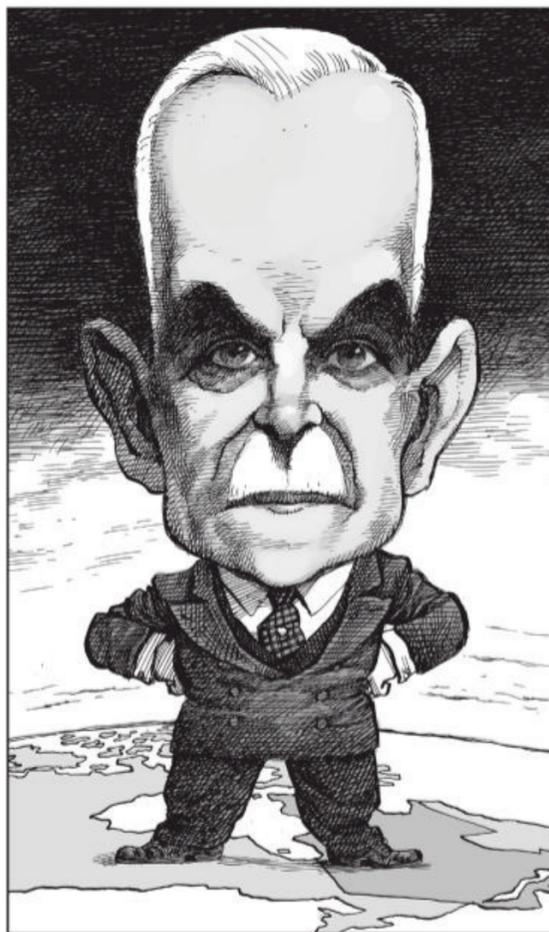
**L**OUIS ST-LAURENT IS ALMOST FORGOTTEN by Canadians, and it is unlikely there will ever be a new biography: unfortunately (and inexplicably), his papers at Library and Archives Canada are scanty, devoid of interest. There is hardly anyone left to interview — the sole exception being Paul Hellyer, who entered the twelfth prime minister's cabinet as associate minister of national defence two months before John Diefenbaker won power in 1957. There are a couple of good books on him: a biography by Dale Thomson, who worked in his office, and another by J.W. Pickersgill, his closest aide and former clerk of the Privy Council. But both men were Liberals, and neither had anything bad to say about a leader they respected greatly.

Perhaps there are few negative things — anyone can say about a man whose primary characteristics were intelligence and integrity. St-Laurent was born in Compton, Quebec, in February 1882. His father was a francophone storekeeper and his mother the child of Irish immigrants. He attended classical college and then law school at Université Laval, and was offered — but declined — a Rhodes Scholarship in 1905. Instead, he began a successful career representing corporate interests as well as Jews who wanted a voice on Montreal's Protestant Board of School Commissioners (there he did not succeed). During the Great Depression, he was legal counsel for the Rowell-Sirois Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations, and in late 1941, when Mackenzie King's Quebec lieutenant, Ernest Lapointe, died, the prime minister asked him to become justice minister. St-Laurent accepted as a matter of wartime duty, and he soon became King's right-hand man. In 1946, King tired of serving as his own foreign minister and stepped down as secretary of state for external affairs, and St-Laurent assumed the role. On King's retirement, in 1948, he was chosen as Liberal leader and prime minister by a party convention.

To some surprise, the new chief proved a very successful campaigner: his "Uncle Louis" persona and his ability to relate to voters and their children were impressive. He swept the nation in the 1949 election, capturing 191 seats and 49.1 percent of the popular vote; in 1953, the Liberals won 169 seats and 48.4 percent of the vote. Even in 1957, when St-Laurent was old, weary, and gripped by depressive episodes, he won 105 seats

and 40.5 percent of the vote, while Diefenbaker's Progressive Conservatives took 112 seats and 38.5 percent of votes cast. St-Laurent might have tried to win support from the CCF and Social Credit to stay in power, but he resigned from office and very soon from the party leadership.

The St-Laurent government's record was impressive. Pickersgill's famous line was that St-Laurent made governing look so easy that Canadians believed anyone could do it — and that was why they elected Diefenbaker. St-Laurent ran his cabinet, leaving no doubt that he was in charge, while giving his strong ministers — including C.D. Howe, the "minister of everything" — their head. As Robert Bothwell notes



A giant of intelligence and integrity.

in this new collection, he had a "quick, sharp mind and a decisive temperament." He brought Newfoundland and Labrador into Canada and ended appeals to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in the U.K. He had generally good relations with the provinces; for most of his tenure, even Maurice Duplessis, the premier of Quebec, was quiescent.

In 1954, St-Laurent was the first Canadian leader to undertake a world tour — an event that even the opposition cheered. And yet that long trip in a slow and noisy RCAF aircraft sapped his energy, so much so that he seems not to have recovered fully, and his last years in office were far from his best. The Pipeline Debate, which Howe directed in spring 1956, earned his govern-

ment a reputation for arrogance. Then St-Laurent and his foreign minister, Lester Pearson, broke with Britain and France over the Suez Crisis in late 1956, a move that sharply divided Canada and led to much criticism of Ottawa for simultaneously supporting the position of the United States and abandoning Canada's mother countries. Combined, these two issues likely led to the defeat of 1957.

I MET LOUIS ST-LAURENT ONCE. I WAS RESEARCHING a book about the Mackenzie King government during the Second World War, and Jack Pickersgill arranged for me to interview the ninety-year-old at his home in Quebec City. It was November 1972, and St-Laurent was quite frail. It showed during the hour I was with him: he confused events from the First and Second World Wars, and he seemed unable to focus for more than a few minutes. I was horrified, feeling that I had intruded on a sick man; indeed, he died eight months later.

Pickersgill sat in on the interview and was very upset as well. As we left, he was close to weeping at what was happening to the man he thought of as a great prime minister and close friend. Pickersgill had worked with St-Laurent at the height of his powers, and he knew that the man was beset by bouts of depression, some prolonged, from the early 1950s onward. Some of the authors gathered in *The Unexpected Louis St-Laurent* touch on these episodes, and perhaps there should have been a chapter on St-Laurent's mental state.

Nonetheless, there are some fine pieces among the twenty-two essays. Jean Thérèse Riley, one of his granddaughters, sets the man into his family context with much charm. Stephen Azzi writes well on how St-Laurent ran his cabinet, and Paul Litt analyzes the way "Uncle Louis" was marketed to the voters so successfully. The volume's editor, Patrice Dutil, contributes the introduction and three chapters: one on St-Laurent in government, one on his electoral coalition (with some useful tables), and one (co-authored with Peter M. Ryan) comparing party platforms in St-Laurent's three elections. There are also good chapters on immigration, on the slow move toward hospital insurance, and on the death penalty. While the authors do not hide the missteps or the government's cautious approach to some issues, the overall impression is of a prime minister who modernized Canada and governed well for almost a decade.

The one exception is a politely scathing chapter by Xavier Gélinas, an able historian at the Canadian Museum of History, in Gatineau, who details how St-Laurent dealt with the French fact. In Gélinas's view, St-Laurent did almost nothing to promote the rights and views of Quebec and

francophones. He had supported conscription during the war, despite the opposition of francophones, and, although Gélinas does not say this, his government had everything in place to impose conscription if the Cold War had turned hot in the early '50s. St-Laurent refused to open diplomatic relations with the Vatican, something Roman Catholics wanted, and, more important, he did little to advance francophones to the senior bureaucratic ranks. He also declined to introduce simultaneous translation into Parliament and to address the need for bilingual government cheques. St-Laurent, Gélinas maintains, "genuinely believed that French-Canadian nationalism was inherently navel-gazing and mistrustful, that it verged on xenophobia and religious intolerance." What's worse, he once said that "the province of Quebec can be a province like any other." To Gélinas, in effect, St-Laurent was apparently a *vendu*, a sellout, which is a harsh judgment indeed.

Gélinas's interpretation would be a stronger one if he had tried to explain how St-Laurent won between 57 and 61 percent of the popular vote in Quebec during his three elections as leader. After the 1949 victory, for example, one newspaper wrote that the results constituted "la défaite des ennemis de l'unité nationale et de la race canadienne-française." Gélinas should perhaps have considered that many in the province might have been getting tired of Duplessis's variant of conservative Catholic nationalism and preferred St-Laurent's brand of an expansive Canadian nationalism instead.

There is one more notable omission among the chapters: defence. The St-Laurent government, from the late 1940s to its defeat in 1957, was without question Canada's best peacetime government for the armed forces. On St-Laurent's watch, Ottawa signed the North Atlantic Treaty, built the Distant Early Warning Line with the United States, and negotiated the North American Air Defence Agreement. The number of soldiers, sailors, and airmen tripled over that period to some 120,000, and the defence budget rose dramatically from \$269 million in 1947–48 to \$1.96 billion in 1952 (the percentage of gross domestic product spent on defence by that point was almost 10 percent, the highest outside the world wars). The navy sent destroyers to Korean waters, became leading practitioners of anti-submarine warfare, and fielded an aircraft carrier and state-of-the-art destroyer escorts; the RCAF put fighter jets into continental air defence, sent an air division of twelve squadrons of Sabre fighters overseas to support NATO, and created substantial air transport capabilities. The Canadian Army, meanwhile, had 40,000 soldiers (double the present number), with a brigade group in Korea, from 1951 to the 1953 armistice, and another with NATO that, once it had shaken down, was widely recognized as a top-of-the-line formation. At the same time, defence manufacturing picked up sharply, as did exports. How this subject could have received only a few pages in this book is a mystery.

Nonetheless, *The Unexpected Louis St-Laurent* is a fine volume, one of the few recent edited collections held together by more than the binding. If it gives Canadians a new regard for a leader they have forgotten, it will have served its purpose. Judged against our present cadre of leaders, Louis St-Laurent looks more and more like a giant. ▲

## THIS AND THAT

# Cobbled Together

## Me and the shoemaker

Michael Humeniuk

**O**NE AIMLESS AFTERNOON, shortly after graduating from university, I came across an old magazine article about Daniel Day-Lewis and the ten months the famed actor spent in Florence apprenticing as a shoemaker. The pages included enchanting pictures of leather, cork, and flame-melted wax, accompanied by handsome men using antique tools to turn suede and cordovan into masterpiece footwear for the likes of Robert DeNiro, Sylvester Stallone, Richard Gere — even Madonna. The more I read about the shoemaker to the stars, the more my imagination filled with sepia-coloured daydreams: labouring in a warmly lit *bottega*, richly perfumed from the turpentine of polish, to the symphony of scissors cutting hide and hammers thudding heels.

It all happened very fast: I put the article away and compiled a list of twenty Italian ateliers. On my first call, to Mannina Firenze, I reached a young shoemaker named Giovanni. I disclosed that although I had experience in the manual trades and was an attentive student, I was no Grimmian elf — I needed training. Too easily, he said yes, but on the condition that I secure my own visa through a local language school. Also, I had to agree to long hours without pay. But common sense would not sabotage my fantasy!

When I arrived in the Tuscan capital, wearing some torn-up Nikes, Giovanni feigned ignorance of our agreement and refused to even look at the emails I held up as evidence. My Italian was not yet good enough for argument, which I doubt would have helped, but the language barrier intensified my frustration. Imagining how Caravaggio once resolved conflict, I considered clobbering the cobbler. But I wanted to see the museums, at the very least, and restrained myself. For two months, on a shoestring budget, I walked miles and miles, wandering the cobblestone streets and entreating dozens of *calzolari* to take me on. They all turned me away, until I met the most famous of them all: Roberto Ugolini.

Roberto has been Florence's top *calzolaio* ever since Stefano Bemmer, Day-Lewis's mentor, passed away in 2012. (Admittedly, any superlative praise should be taken lightly: every *maestro* has his partisans.) I had put off coming here, because I assumed I'd have little chance of working for the master craftsman. But by special providence, it turned out this *maestro* despised Giovanni, and, to put a pea in his arch-enemy's shoe, he told me I could sit and watch for an afternoon. That unlikely day turned into an unlikely two weeks, and after many hours quietly observing the cordwainer at work, I was at last handed a precious last with a leather sole. Remove the clinching nails, Roberto told me, without saying anything else. "Words are good, but they are not the best,"

Goethe wrote of the apprentice's life. "The spirit in which we act is the highest matter."

Three other apprentices watched as I removed that first nail: two young men from Puglia, the southern stiletto heel that steps away from Albania, and a teenager from Japan. We all worked Monday to Saturday, from eight to eight, our day punctuated by a mid-morning espresso and a two-hour pasta lunch. On Fridays, Roberto would bring us a bottle of red wine, his favourite being the San Felice Chianti Classico, which costs much less than the shoes we crafted. Those ranged from €1,900 to €10,000, with each pair taking up to ninety hours to make.

The general process was divided into three steps. First, a client would arrange an appointment to have his feet measured (once while seated, once while standing) and to select a model (the most common and conservative choices were black oxfords, while the least conservative I witnessed were blue spectators made with *legal* elephant skin that had been tattooed). Then, about a week later, a wooden last would be fashioned. Some were displayed at the front of the shop, usually those belonging to famous clients and repeat customers (it was not uncommon for some to order three pairs annually). We kept the rest in the back — hundreds of them, some so old that they were the ghostly tokens of men long presumed dead. These were tied to the ceiling in clusters that naturally fell into shapes similar to banana bunches.

Working with the last, we would begin the second step of constructing a *prova* — a trial shoe made of low-quality leather and a plastic heel. Only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches, they say, and if the *prova* was too loose, part of the last would be shaved down. If too tight (the most common problem region would be above the metatarsals or behind the heel), then a layer of leather would be added. But typically the model fit *perfectly*. Cinderella would be happy, and we would begin the final step: the long, unforgiving manual construction.

Traditional shoemaking happens not on a table or even a cobbler's anvil but in one's lap — using both thighs as a vise and bringing oneself autofellatally to the work. Most days, I'd leave the shop with polished palms, sore from bending, and with skin shavings under my nails.

After only six months, my money was running out. While my Italian had improved, my truancy at the language school and my unpaid apprenticeship meant that I had violated the conditions of my student visa. And my back was in chronic pain. As much as I wanted to continue learning from Roberto, it was time to leave. With nothing to show for my experience, except one cherished photograph and some peculiar tools, I even wore the same old sneakers on my way home. ▲

# For Your Reference

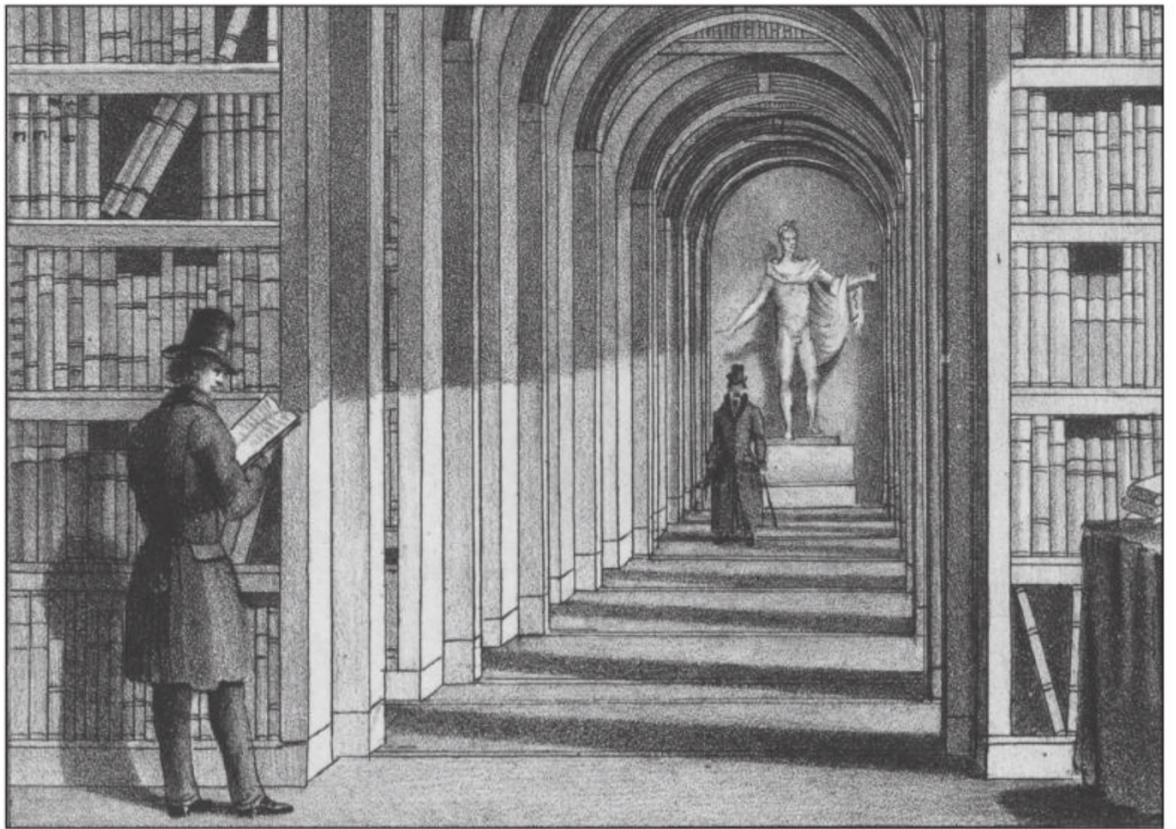
Citing foreign influence

Michael McNichol

**T**HERE IS A FUNDAMENTAL AND irreconcilable difference between Americans and Canadians on the issue of freedom of speech or expression. Although both of our nations value and protect this human right, the limits to which we take it are markedly different. For Americans, it is inalienable, intrinsic to the dignity of the individual; while the Canadian Constitution subjects it “to such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society.” Rights discourse in Canada, although grounded in a conception of the individual, is more concerned with the welfare of the community than is its American counterpart. If the United States is founded on the myth of individual rights, then Canada is founded on the myth of social cohesion. And nowhere is this more evident than in libraries, where the tension plays out in surprising and consequential ways.

Founded in 1876, the American Library Association has had a Canadian presence since at least 1900, when its yearly conference was held in Montreal. (The lesser-known Canadian Library Association was founded in 1946 and, unfortunately, dissolved in 2016.) As the pre-eminent organization of its kind, the ALA sets the tone for libraries and, importantly, accredits university programs across Canada. This accreditation, which is granted only after an applicant school proves that it can reproduce the standards and values espoused by the ALA, is no small thing: most career positions throughout the country, in either public or academic libraries, now require an ALA-approved graduate degree. Through its outsize influence, then, the Chicago-based non-profit reproduces its ideology in our librarians and library administrators, while it directly and indirectly shapes the policies and views of the institutions they run.

The ALA’s position on freedom of expression is a severe one: it is “an inalienable human right and the foundation for self-government” and “encompasses the freedoms of speech, press, religion, assembly, and association, and the corollary right to receive information without interference and without compromising personal privacy.” Such absolutism requires a library to provide material of every kind and to play host to any group or speaker, since doing otherwise would interfere with its ability to impart information. Under this formulation, the content of what’s shared is value neutral, with all value being placed on its availability and transmission: fake news, racist hyperbole, and exclusionary ideologies have the same worth as more reputable and inclusive information. In this context, the only option for those who disagree with a speaker or group is to “respect-



The tension plays out in surprising and consequential ways.

fully challenge each other’s ideas and not the library’s democratic mandate to provide space for both,” as the head of the Toronto Public Library, Vickery Bowles, has explained. Thus, a library itself is somehow above criticism for what’s said inside it.

But the Charter of Rights and Freedoms does not provide for absolute rights, inalienable from the individuals who hold them; rather, our rights are guaranteed alongside “reasonable limits.” (Those who crafted the Charter, of course, had the benefit of seeing how the American model had actually played out.) More fundamentally, it reflects our more social conception of the greater good, with individual rights being held in service of the protection of the whole. Remember, in Canada, your rights end where mine begin, and the contestation between them is an ongoing balancing act.

The creeping Americanization of how we understand freedom of expression has led to scandal, including that surrounding the controversial writer Meghan Murphy, whom Bowles allowed to speak at a Toronto Public Library branch in October 2019. (Consider that even Twitter has removed the welcome mat for Murphy, because of her repeated use of anti-transgender rhetoric and misgendering of her critics.) Elsewhere, a trustee of the Edmonton Public Library was forced to resign in early 2020 for her vocal criticism of free-speech absolutism. And in Ottawa, the public library was taken to court in 2017 when it cancelled a screening of the Islamophobic film *Killing Europe*. In that case,

the Ontario Court of Justice declined to rule on the real Charter issue at hand, finding instead that the library had acted appropriately within the bounds of contract law and was within its rights to cancel the screening.

No doubt, many maintain, along with the ALA and its Canadian adherents, that libraries need to provide a full range of views that represent an entire community. And in the American formulation, this might be correct. But is it also correct that Canadian libraries, subject to Canadian laws and social mores, should provide platforms for groups whose messages hurt others? If by providing space for one you are effectively excluding the other, then you are not representing the entire community or diverse viewpoints; you are merely providing space for hatred to breed. If trans people or Jewish people or any other people are frightened (or otherwise unable) to make use of a library because that branch has hosted groups hurling hateful or violent claims, then the avowed goal of freedom of expression itself has been undermined.

What’s more, this is an issue of cultural sovereignty. Should Canadian libraries be subject to the ideological requirements of a foreign organization that promotes an imposed understanding of rights? Shouldn’t our libraries, available to all and certainly a linchpin in our society, be replicating our values based on our own Constitution? So long as Canadian libraries require their workers to hold degrees from ALA-accredited universities, this tension will remain and future confrontations will be inevitable. ▲

# Graphic Narrative

Drawn-out dramas of the North

J. R. Patterson

## Paying the Land

Joe Sacco

Henry Holt & Co.

272 pages, hardcover and ebook

**A**SQUALLING BABY HELD ALOFT, its umbilical cord falling into a moose-skin boat beached on a riverside. Sinew nets bursting with fish. Dogs hauling laden sleds through the deep taiga forest. The fatty underside of a hide scraped with a flint rock. A cadre of kin working together to erect a camp along the Mackenzie River. These interweaving scenes, which open *Paying the Land*, come with a feeling of a history long since passed. But history is close at hand in the Northwest Territories — and the images are revealed to be a recreation of Paul Andrew's childhood. Recalling his years spent living on the land, Andrew, a former chief of the Shúhtaot'ine, or Mountain Dene, describes a difficult but satisfying life, one "dictated by the environment, by the animals," where youth, by watching, listening, and imitating their elders, found themselves woven into the circle of community and tradition.

Circles arise often in *Paying the Land*, as the cartoonist and journalist Joe Sacco winds the most complex story of his career into a finely tuned narrative loop. Sacco, who was born in Malta and now lives in Oregon, made his name while reporting in the Middle East (*Palestine*, from 1993; *Footnotes in Gaza*, from 2009) and the Balkans (*Safe Area Goražde*, from 2000). While this latest outing finds him in the far safer NWT, he comes to see it as a place that's just as fractured as those war zones.

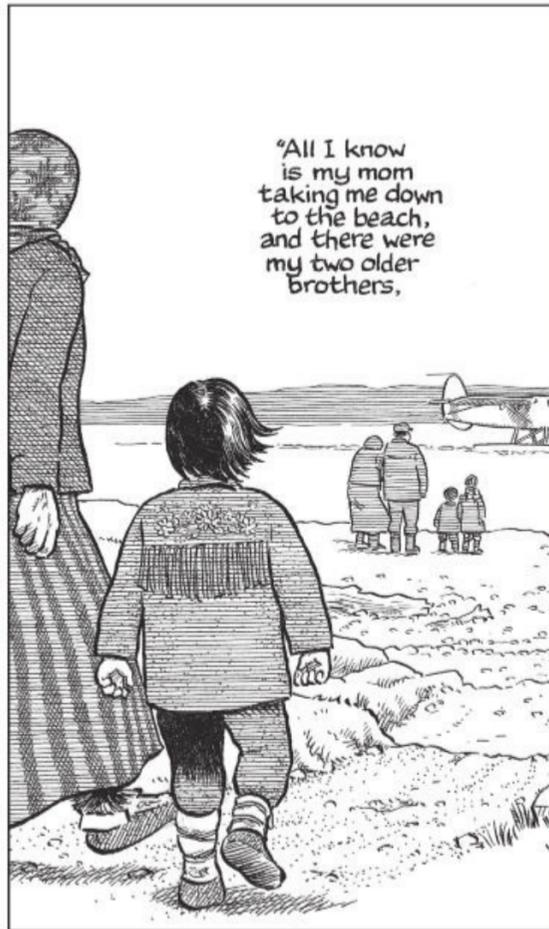
After contemplating the traders, missionaries, oilmen, and miners who have gone north of the sixtieth parallel to carve out their desired pound of flesh or soil, Sacco changes tack rather abruptly. He realizes there is something else at play here, some deeper, lingering problem that contaminates the earth beneath the Dene's feet: if a circle has no beginning, where does one look to fix it once it's broken?

◆

SACCO SEEMS AWARE OF THE SNAGS AN OUTSIDER like himself might catch upon in tackling a story like this: the white saviour complex, the noble-savage trope, the treaty-idolizing "John Locke that reposes in every Western heart." And he knows its telling isn't easy. Rather than finding media-starved people eager to share their past, Sacco encounters a culture that feels tired of talking and sick of not being heard. More than once, he's told that those outside the bounds of family and community, especially those "poking around with their anthropology sticks... can

fall into a more monetized sphere." People are wary of his curiosity, and his medium isn't always appreciated; one man makes it clear that issues facing the Dene's existence are "not a cartoon... not a joke." Such is Sacco's compassion that the elusiveness he sees drives him only to indict himself.

"What's the difference between me and an oil company?" Sacco asks. "We've both come here to extract something." But, of course, there is a difference. He is measured without sounding distant, impassioned without being discouragingly biased. All the same, he largely recuses himself from the book; his presence as both narrator and character (drawn, as always, as a pulpy,



Where history is close at hand.

blank-eyed caricature) is largely absent. This stance marks a departure from his other works, where he more fully integrates himself with the story through a sort of gonzo cartoonism.

But intentional decolonization of the narrative leads the book to difficult places. Sacco does well to render the knot of economic and political dealings of the North understandable, a Herculean task considering the thousands of years' worth of technological, religious, and societal change that descended upon the region in mere decades. Only midway through does the book begin to soar, as sparse white panels give way to a banking seaplane over a northern lake, the craft in transit to collect a payload of children bound for residential schools.

IF CANADA NEVER OPENLY DECLARED ITSELF TO BE at war with Indigenous peoples (as did the United States), it was only because war is predicated on a certain understanding of chaos. Ottawa's method was anything but: blackmail, violence, and coordinated evacuations were used to fulfill the dreams of Duncan Campbell Scott, who, as deputy superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs, promised "to continue until there [was] not a single Indian in Canada that [had] not been absorbed into the body politic."

Flown to Inuvik's Grollier Hall in the early 1960s, Paul Andrew was at the sharp end of that ambition. His language, family, and home were replaced with a number and a religion, as the process began of forcing this child — yet another nonentity from *terra incognita* — into the Anglo-Catholic mould. "You [weren't] particularly anybody or anything. So they're going to have to remake you," he recalls. After the years of verbal, sexual, and physical abuse, "you begin to believe what they say, that you're not good enough."

Sacco has never shied away from putting the "graphic" in graphic novels, and anyone inclined to shrug off the horrors of residential schools and their consequences as overblown or rhetorical may find in his stark depictions of Andrew's experience something more effective than cold understanding: empathy. We are visual beings, and reading a man's description of his ordeals, while simultaneously watching the boy he was suffer through them, causes us to recoil. By chronicling individual after individual this way, Sacco reveals the impact the treaties and land deals had and continue to have.

*Paying the Land* is more than a collection of bad memories, however. There is also hope, although the term means different things to different people. While some Dene welcome resource extraction and a wage-based economy, others search for a clearer path back to the self-sufficiency of their ancestors.

The issues Sacco raises won't be solved quickly, but there is an immediacy that runs through the work. Shared knowledge of language, legends, and bushcraft skills — all substantial facets of reclaiming Indigenous heritage — grows weaker by the day. Although there are no answers to be found here, it's clear that in a world where the buck stops at capitalism, pain — especially the pain of the powerless — is often meaningless unless it can be coupled with an economic equivalent. Governments banking on ecclesiastical aphorisms (particularly "Money answers all things") can repartee unto infinity; they will solve nothing so long as "How much did it hurt?" refers to the pocketbook and not the soul. ▲

# In the Eye of the Historian

Three takes on Louis Riel

Christopher Dummitt

**The North-West Is Our Mother: The Story of Louis Riel's People, the Métis Nation**

Jean Teillet

Patrick Crean Editions

592 pages, hardcover and softcover

**The Audacity of His Enterprise: Louis Riel and the Métis Nation That Canada Never Was, 1840–1875**

M. Max Hamon

McGill-Queen's University Press

432 pages, hardcover and ebook

**A Rush to Judgment: The Unfair Trial of Louis Riel**

Roger E. Salhany

Dundurn

336 pages, softcover and ebook

HERE WAS A TIME WHEN HISTORIANS used some rather unsavoury, frankly racist language to talk about the Métis, the descendants of Indigenous women and European men, who emerged as a collective group in the Northwest around the turn of the nineteenth century. In these older histories, they typically appeared in accounts of conflict — with the fur trade companies, with the early settlers, and with the Canadian government.

Most of these histories touched on two particularly famous, or infamous, conflicts. The first happened in 1869, after the new federal government purchased the Hudson's Bay Company's claims to vast stretches of land covering much of western Canada, without first consulting the people who actually lived there. Then, in 1885, the Métis called on their leader from that earlier conflict, Louis Riel, to return to Canada and help the communities along the South Saskatchewan River to force Ottawa to respond to their petitions. And while most historians now describe these two conflicts as the Riel or Métis resistance movements — and not rebellions — that's not how many saw the events at the time.

In *The North-West Is Our Mother*, Jean Teillet, a lawyer in British Columbia and a proud descendant of the Riel family, offers a distinctly Métis perspective on this history. Documents from an earlier era "rarely tell the Métis side of the story," she writes early on, and the histories produced from these records "are anything but neutral and unbiased." Teillet cites historians like Alexander Begg, who talked about the nation's "wild and improvident" nature, and George Stanley, who described the Métis as "indolent, thoughtless and improvident." It all sounds rather sordid, and a reader might be inclined to seek out an alternative perspective, which Teillet

certainly offers. Her book retells Métis history from the origins of the "new nation" in the 1790s through what she calls its five moments of "national resistance." That takes us up to the present day and the legal battles with the government of Canada over Manitoba Act land grants (and whether they were the equivalent of a treaty), as well as the battle to define who is (and, most importantly, who is *not*) Métis.

Teillet's opening, though, performs a sleight of hand. She pretends that the views of scholars like Stanley or Begg or the political scientist Thomas Flanagan actually represent current opinion and scholarship: "The fact that these versions of history have until very recently



On competing judgments.

been accepted uncritically as *the* history tells us more about the writers and Canada than about the Métis Nation." But Begg published his book in 1894, and Stanley's work, which Teillet calls a "standard text," first appeared in 1936. These aren't exactly contemporary scholars. And Flanagan, while a more recent practitioner and prominent in his own fashion, is more of a contrarian outlier in the writing of Canadian history. In fact, what's almost entirely missing from *The North-West Is Our Mother* is any indication of how much history has been rewritten lately to include — and sometimes wholly adopt — Métis views of the past. It's a useful omission for Teillet's purposes, and a classic case of a straw man argument.

In reality, the push to account more accurately for the Métis side of things has been under way for decades. Even back in the 1950s, when Donald Creighton published his biography of John A. Macdonald, he was criticized for being far too biased against Riel and the Métis. Historical writing since then (not exactly "very recently") has more often been sympathetic to the "new nation."

Teillet actually mimics, in a funhouse-mirror way, the biased accounts she criticizes. She eschews the idea of a balanced history and instead offers up a one-sided narrative. In recounting the infamous Seven Oaks incident, for example, when a group of Métis killed a large party of settlers, she leads us to believe that the stupidity and cruelty of the HBC governor were to blame. On the battles between Métis and government forces in 1885, she lists the names of every Métis combatant who fell in battle, in a kind of reverential Remembrance Day fashion. What she doesn't do is mention the name of anyone who died on the other side.

Such complex events have been analyzed quite well by several modern scholars, but for Teillet, Seven Oaks matters more as a nation-building myth: "A battle in which your ancestors successfully defended themselves against outlanders who came to take their land — that is a good story, one that a people can be pleased with, one that teaches them about their noble origins — as a good people who fought to defend their lands and their families." For generations, some settler accounts did the same thing but in reverse, recounting the incident as a brutal massacre by vicious "savages." Teillet just switches the roles and makes the settlers the one-dimensional bad guys.

If you blotted out all words in the text except for adjectives and descriptive phrases, you would still know when Teillet is describing someone who was Métis: a "noble" people for whom "family was deeply treasured." They lived by "reciprocity, mutual support and the sharing ethic." They were known as "'the best hunters, the best horsemen and the bravest warriors' of the Plains" (she quotes the nineteenth-century explorer Joseph Nicollet). As they do now, they possessed an oral culture that gave them amazing memory skills, but, as she condescendingly puts it, were "tolerant of the poor memory skills of those who live in reliance on writing." The leader Gabriel Dumont was "a man of his word and a man who cared for the people he led." He was a "lodestone" and a "mighty hunter," who was "forged in . . . battle." Other leaders "seemed invincible" as they rode into battle "fearlessly" — like "holy men." Throughout, Teillet assures us that Métis and other Indigenous leaders were "chosen for their

gifts of grace, fine oratory, qualities of courage and vision, and for their charisma."

The contrast to her descriptions of Euro-Canadians is striking. Settler leaders were "creatures of hierarchical training." One was "two-faced." Another was "a blunderbuss, full of his own importance and righteousness." When that man, Governor Semple, was killed, along with most of his small group of followers, it was really his own fault. Teillet repeats the insults of the day, calling him "Mr. Simple" and describing him as "impulsive by nature." Settler leaders, in general, were "autocratic, incompetent or corrupt."

The effect is *Lego Movie* history, where "everything is awesome"—at least when it comes to Teillet's own people. To give her a modicum of credit, she pretty much admits this up front, arguing that her people need stories of which to be proud.

◆

JEAN TEILLET TACKLES THE LARGER MÉTIS STORY, but with *The Audacity of His Enterprise*, the Queen's University historian M. Max Hamon focuses specifically on the nation's most famous man, Louis Riel. Hamon is among the many "ally" scholars who have taken it upon themselves to "unsettle" Canadian history and Canada itself. They see their work on "settler colonialism" as a kind of academic activism. They aren't on the barricades, but their goals are decidedly political. And so Hamon makes two broad arguments about Riel's life: First, Riel wasn't just someone who "resisted" Canadian expansion; he and his people were directly involved in creating the country. Second, Riel was a translator between the Métis and Canada.

Hamon starts with Riel's family and parents, arguing the Métis had a much more involved notion of kinship than Euro-Canadians (he uses the Cree word "wahkohtowin," as others have). Where some have suggested thirteen-year-old Riel felt out of place when he headed east to study at a Sulpician school, in Lower Canada, Hamon insists that he felt right at home. Where other biographers have highlighted the fact that Riel was asked to leave early, without becoming a priest, Hamon argues that we shouldn't read anything into this—many students left early. So too, when a young woman rejected Riel romantically, we're meant to believe this was absolutely fine and that the young man wasn't bothered at all. He actually headed back west, Hamon suggests, because he was now well educated and had excellent contacts with which to bring opportunities to his people.

Yet much of the evidence for this period of Riel's life is scanty and leaves rooms for dispute. For instance, if you ask someone to marry you and she rejects you, you might think this would hurt. It could well be that Hamon's arguments are correct. But your decision to accept his (as opposed to any other biographer's) interpretation is somewhat arbitrary. It just so happens that Hamon always seems to select the interpretations that make Riel seem magnificent. The irony here is that, early in his book, Hamon cites the French historian François Furet on how some biographers make "too much" of their subjects. And then he offers a version of Riel who is always in control of his destiny and never makes mistakes.

The most intriguing chapter in *The Audacity of His Enterprise* presents a long description of an incident Hamon uncovered in the archives.

As a student in Montreal, Riel took part in a prominent debate with another student. The two re-enacted a disagreement between Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Charles Borde. Rousseau was famous for his critique of civilization, for his romanticization of "natural" man, and for his argument that the origins of human inequality could be found in civilization. You might expect Riel to have taken Rousseau's position. In fact, he defended that of Borde, who argued for the benefits of education and culture to improve the uncivilized.

Hamon recounts the debate and assures us that the whole thing was a stroke of genius on Riel's part. The colonial record has erased Riel and his Métis identity, he argues, and we need to give Riel his "agency" back. The young man was being ironic, as he "intentionally deployed his Indigeneity to add weight to the matrix of epistemological dichotomies of civilized/savage and morality/corruption."

Riel's adoption of Rousseau's arguments, Hamon insists, was a ploy: clearly, his status as Métis—that is, as Indigenous—"contradicts his argument for civilization." As with much in the book, this may well be true. But the whole argument comes directly out of the historian's mind: it isn't backed up by anything in the primary sources.

*The Audacity of His Enterprise* follows a similar trajectory elsewhere, as Hamon combines interesting archival research with overstretched arguments. He wants us to pay less attention to the physical violence of the 1869–70 resistance and instead focus on Riel's role as someone who brought people together. And though Riel clearly did build a kind of political consensus at Red River, other historians have told this story—with less theoretical jargon.

Hamon goes on to give a rather one-sided account of the many controversies of the rebellion, including the execution of Thomas Scott, an Irish Protestant settler. The lasting controversy over Scott's death is, Hamon argues, merely the result of "Canadian propaganda." Again, this isn't entirely untrue (much was made of Scott's execution for political ends), but the leaps of logic that Hamon and other ally scholars take in defending the 1870 execution seem a little careless—as if the fact that Scott was a ruffian justified his death.

Still, Hamon doesn't go as far as Teillet, who claims that Scott, a prisoner at the time, was "perfectly placed to lead an attack from the inside." Imagine all the executions that could be justified if prisoners were somehow too dangerous precisely *because* they were prisoners. You don't have to accept uncritically the Ontario Orange vilification of Riel, whose provisional government ordered the execution, to think that there might also be something wrong with undisguised anti-settler accounts.

The killing of Scott sealed Riel's fate. The Canadians from Red River went east and used the incident to denounce the Métis uprising. The prime minister, John A. Macdonald, had already set in motion a military expedition to head west and solidify Ottawa's hold on the colony. The government negotiated with the representatives from Red River, but when the military arrived at Fort Garry, Riel was forced to flee.

Hamon's account of the next portion of Riel's life is both intriguing and, again, overstated. In his interpretation, the following five years stood as something of a triumph. He traces Riel

through his exile and especially his involvement in the campaign to get an amnesty for himself and others. Hamon draws on the various letters Riel wrote to figures in Quebec and the United States, and the documents he amassed about himself and his people. The book includes diagrams of Riel's interconnected circles. According to Hamon, Riel "made strategic alliances with Canadian networks in an effort to hijack the Confederation project and place Métis interests at the centre of the Canadian political consensus." When his colleague Ambroise Lépine was arrested and then tried for the murder of Thomas Scott, Riel was there in spirit, helping to build the coalition that called for commuting the death sentence.

All of this might be convincing, or at least interesting, if it were tempered by some important contextual details. For one, Riel's letter writing wasn't at all unusual. Anyone who has been through the archives of any political figure (and really just about anyone from the past) knows that people wrote letters. You could come up with similar diagrams showing the "networks" of influence for literally tens of thousands of Canadians; many would look pretty similar to what Hamon wants us to believe was so special. It is useful to know how involved Riel was in the campaign for his own amnesty, certainly. But the larger interpretation needs a little more modesty.

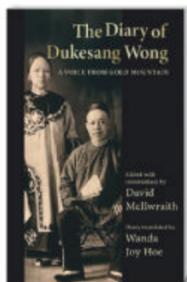
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HAMON ENDS *THE AUDACITY OF HIS ENTERPRISE* IN 1875, after the Lépine trial and the political solution that Alexander Mackenzie's Liberal government imposed: Lépine's death sentence was indeed commuted and most of those involved at Red River were given amnesty. (The three exceptions were Lépine, Riel, and the Fenian William O'Donoghue, who were exiled for five more years.) It's an odd place to end the book, though. Not long after 1875, Riel's friends had him admitted to an insane asylum. When he finally left it, in 1878, he went back to the United States, where he married and started another life, all with marginal success.

Hamon defends his end date, saying it's "intentionally unsettling" and part of his larger attempt to "decolonize history." Ending things in 1875 also allows him to conveniently sidestep evidence that doesn't square with a pre-selected and highly politicized story, including Riel's final act, when he was invited back to lead another, less successful movement, at the end of which he was executed for treason.

Unlike Teillet, Hamon is not a nationalist who is motivated to provide great stories for the Métis people. His book is more like an exercise in what the late British philosopher Roger Scruton called "oikophobia"—the opposite of xenophobia. This is not the dislike of foreigners but the dislike of one's own culture and history. A significant number of scholars have taken up the oikophobic interpretive lens, attacking Canadian sovereignty, fixating on the worst blemishes of the Canadian past, and offering highly ideological renderings of old stories so that they are retold to emphasize the bad intentions and harmful actions of so-called settler colonialism. (It's the kind of scholarship that offers an intellectual smokescreen for those who pulled down a statue of John A. Macdonald, in Montreal, last summer.)

One of Hamon's stated goals with *The Audacity of His Enterprise* is to promote Riel as a nation builder, someone who created and didn't just

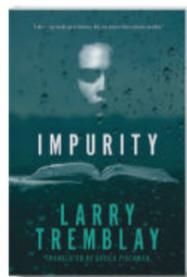


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**Searching for Sam**

*Sophie Bienvenu  
Translated by Rhonda Mullins*

Mathieu lives on the street. His main companion is his pitbull, Sam – the one connection he retains in the world, helping him to stay alive. So when Sam disappears out of the blue, Mathieu is left adrift. As he frantically searches for her, his past begins to re-emerge in flashbacks, revealing the tragedies of his life.

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resist. But where has Hamon been over the last three decades? Back in 1992, the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba declared Louis Riel a founding father. In 2007, Louis Riel Day became a statutory holiday in the province. For a quarter century, anyone who has walked past the legislative building in Winnipeg has been greeted by an eleven-foot statue of Riel, gripping his list of rights and looming over the entire scene. This is hardly someone who has been relegated to a dark corner of history.



IT HAS LONG BEEN POSSIBLE — AND ESTABLISHED practice — to offer accounts of historical events that are actually balanced. From Gerald Friesen's classic work on the prairies to the books of J. M. Bumsted, we have had many decades of excellent scholarship that doesn't insist on an overly politicized interpretation of Métis history. In *A Rush to Judgment*, the former Superior Court of Ontario judge Roger E. Salhany follows in this tradition and takes the reader through Louis Riel's trial for treason, in July 1885.

A lot has been written about the three-day trial and its fairness, but Salhany offers the historically informed view of someone steeped in the law. Sometimes he is a little "presentist" — assuming or wishing that current ideas of justice had prevailed at the time. But mostly Salhany keeps this tendency in check and provides a brilliant overview of the trial and a wonderful analysis of why parts of it were "unfair." Anyone looking for a short and balanced account of Métis history and the history of the larger resistance could do much worse than to read his first two chapters, which neatly summarize the key events and stories.

Salhany then presents the personalities of those involved in the courtroom. Over the years, the proceedings have been criticized for many reasons: They were held in Regina, in front of a jury of only six men and not the usual twelve. They could (or should) have been held in Winnipeg, where the jury would have contained six French or Métis members. Riel was charged under a medieval statute, which dictated a penalty of death, rather than an updated statute that would have allowed for a lesser sentence. And the trial was rushed and didn't allow the defence time to prepare. An even more modern-day critique, put forward by scholars steeped in settler-colonial theory, would be that Riel ought not to have been tried at all, because the Canadian state itself was engaged in genocidal warfare. *A Rush to Judgment* doesn't address this last point, but Salhany carefully goes through all of the others.

What Salhany ends up with is a measured analysis of the evidence that dissects the trial in useful ways. He is especially critical of the judge, Hugh Richardson, who probably should not have presided in the first place (for one thing, his boss appeared on behalf of the Crown). Salhany also highlights several instances where Richardson got in over his head, allowed for improper lines of inquiry, and failed to rule out inappropriate questions.

Riel's lawyers opted to put forward a defence of insanity. In *The North-West Is Our Mother*, Teillet argues that this choice was "their" defence, not Riel's. And surely this reading is correct, for Riel wanted to defend himself by arguing the merits of the Métis cause in front of the jury. But it's worth pointing out (as Salhany does) that in deploying an insanity plea, his lawyers were trying to save Riel's life. The evidence of treason was

overwhelming, and a defence of the justness of Riel's cause was not a valid legal argument. The only way to save Riel was to convince the jury that he was not of sound mind. At the end of the trial, Riel finally had his chance to make his own case. "The fact that his speech from the dock was a disavowal of his insanity," Salhany writes, "was probably the strongest evidence of his insanity."

Riel likely wanted to die as a martyr and, ultimately, he got his wish. Here, Salhany's interpretation is worth quoting at length, because it so resoundingly goes against Hamon's version of Riel as a triumphant state builder:

His life had been certainly one series of failures after another. The earlier rebellion in Manitoba . . . had ended in his exile, and a life of poverty and ignominy in the United States. He had fought the Canadian government twice and lost. His dream of creating a separate Métis country had been dashed and it was unlikely that there would ever be another chance to lead his people. If he died at the hands of the detested federal government, at least in death he would be remembered.

*A Rush to Judgment* is a fine example of sympathetic, thoughtful scholarship, with a clean style that neatly summarizes complex topics in digestible chunks, all the while rooted in the evidence of the time. It is exactly the kind of scholarship that we need about controversial topics. One might quibble with particular points, but it's clear how and why Salhany is making his assessment: he follows the sources closely.



BACK IN 2000, THE POLITICAL SCIENTIST ALAN Cairns warned in *Citizens Plus: Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian State* that we were in for a tumultuous period of conflict between differing accounts of history. It was to be expected. The colonizers' version — with all of its assumptions of cultural superiority — was finally being overthrown by the Indigenous take. Of course, there was much to be gained by this reversal, and Cairns hoped for a "continuing dialogue between competing versions of the past" — competing versions that could "keep each other honest."

We can still hope for this emphasis on diverse viewpoints, where a variety of perspectives allows us to understand yesterday (and its implications today) in a more truthful and rigorous fashion. We might hope that scholars and historians don't necessarily see themselves as telling only "their" side of the story, as if one's ethnic background means putting on a pair of glasses that allows one to see only in a certain colour. We can also hope for scholarship where non-Native scholars are able to be more than mere "allies" to Indigenous peoples, relegating themselves to oikophobic attacks on a nation's history.

There is much to be critical about in Canadian history, especially as it relates to the Métis and Louis Riel. But it would be a shame if we simply replaced the racist term "half-breed," with all of its insulting stereotypes, with the term "settler," which is increasingly taking on a racially charged hue of its own, with equally simplistic clichés. In *A Rush to Judgment*, at least, there is hope that we can escape the tragic pretense of progress, when we claim to be moving forward only to find ourselves back where we all began.

# Comfort Foods

The tragic tale of a cookbook

Hattie Klotz

## The Taste of Longing: Ethel Mulvany and Her Starving Prisoners of War Cookbook

Suzanne Evans

Between the Lines

354 pages, softcover and ebook

**I**F YOU'VE EVER BEEN PROPERLY HUNGRY, you know it's a sensation that takes over your whole body. By "properly hungry," I don't mean you've missed a meal or two. I mean when you're already slim, without great reserves on which to draw, and you miss meal after meal after meal. This is the kind of hunger that becomes your only concern.

Suzanne Evans captures this preoccupation in her new biography of Ethel Mulvany, a Canadian internee at Changi Jail, the notorious Japanese prisoner-of-war camp for civilians in Singapore. "There is nothing like that debilitating, that going-down-the-valley-one-by-one pain of hunger," she once said. "There is nothing where the body is more vulnerable to absolute capitulation."

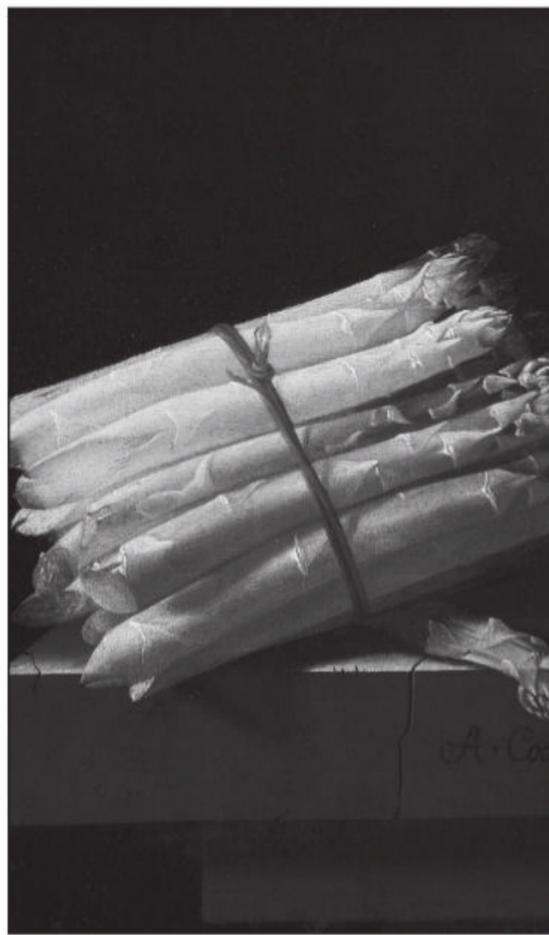
Evans was working as a research fellow at the Canadian War Museum, in Ottawa, when she first came across Mulvany, one of the driving forces behind the well-known Changi quilts, a secret communications system between female and male prisoners. The historian then rediscovered a forgotten cookbook compiled by the feisty woman from Manitoulin Island, who had survived on little more than bayam soup. "Not much more than cooked-up buffalo grass," Mulvany later recalled. "How would you like that?" The camp staple's monotony notwithstanding, Mulvany and others had fantasized a great deal about a great many foods. "How could the prisoners write recipes while starving?" Evans asks. "Why did they? Who were these women?" She does an excellent job at answering these questions by delving deep into the life of an outlier: a social worker, teacher, and ambulance driver from a remote place who dealt with both bipolar disorder and what we would now call PTSD.

♦

NOT CONTENT TO SETTLE FOR MARRIAGE, A FAMILY, and the expectations of small-town Ontario, the vivacious and audacious twenty-eight-year-old Ethel Rogers set off in 1933 to study school systems around the world, on a trip sponsored by the Canadian Society for Literature and the Arts. In Kyoto, she met the emperor and empress in their garden at the Imperial Palace. In Shanghai, the Canadian trade commissioner threw a party in her honour, shortly before fate and a dodgy stomach on board an ocean liner led her into the arms of a British military doctor, Denis Mulvany, stationed in Lucknow, India.

The two soon married, and Ethel conformed to social mores and gave up her job. In Cawnpore, the couple had a staff of eighteen, or, as she put it, "twenty-two if you count the four who took care of the *two* horses." With little to do, she volunteered—to the displeasure of her new husband—notably working to bathe and feed infants in the local hospital.

In spring 1939, Ethel and Denis planned a trip to Britain, where they would spend some time before she continued to Canada. Despite the looming threat of war, she arrived home, just in time to see her dying adoptive mother. Returning to the U.K. in September, she had her first bout of mania and was admitted to a



The prisoners' mouths began to water.

nursing home; Denis, meanwhile, was posted to Singapore. Following her release, Ethel had an accident and dislocated her shoulder, which delayed the couple's reunion. After sailing to Southeast Asia by way of Bombay, on an Italian liner packed with refugees fleeing the war, she wrote about the voyage's food, a precursor, perhaps, to her obsession with the topic.

Ethel enjoyed a period of relative calm from March 1940, when she finally landed in Singapore, to December 8, 1941, when the Japanese started shelling the island city. And then, just like that, it was over. The colony fell on February 15, 1942, and by March 2, Ethel was on her way to her first internment camp. She was transferred to Changi a week later. (Denis was

taken to a barracks at the tip of the island and did not see Ethel again until war's end.)

It was at Changi—alongside 1,000 other women and 330 children—that Mulvany experienced more than two years of grinding misery and worked tirelessly to distract herself and others from that reality. She negotiated constantly for special dispensation to leave the camp, so that she might purchase extra supplies for her companions, and she occupied their minds with various projects, including the quilts, stitched from scraps and imbued with hidden messages. They also built a "silence hut," to escape the constant noise: "There was nowhere on earth there wasn't somebody yakety yak yakking." By far her most successful diversions, however, centred on food.

Inspired by the poem "The Depression Ends," by her former professor Ned Pratt, Mulvany organized "tea" parties, where dozens dressed in their prison best would envision what they would eat as soon as they were released: "As the women talked, their mouths began to water and soon they started having to swallow their saliva. After these sessions it dawned on Ethel that she was left with the odd but very pleasant sensation of having actually eaten." Mulvany also encouraged the prisoners to write their favourite recipes down on bits of newspaper and old ledger books, and when she at last returned to Canada, in July 1946, she compiled some of their recipes in *Prisoners of War Cookbook*. "I want you to make me two thousand copies," she told a reluctant printer on Toronto's Danforth Avenue. "This is to remember the ones who died and to help those who just made it through." In the end, he printed 20,000 copies on low-grade paper, the sales of which raised \$18,000. With the funds, Mulvany sent oranges, tea, and cigarettes to former POWs living under rationing in Britain.

Evans includes one of those recipes at the beginning of every chapter. Some, such as toad-in-the-hole and posy pudding, are classic stick-to-your-ribs comfort foods. Others, such as fowl badum or dry curry, nod to something more exotic. In preparing the book, Evans asked her friends and family to test some of the seventy-year-old recipes, and there's a charming postscript that includes their comments—helpful if you're planning to try a couple.

With *The Taste of Longing*, Evans puts food into sharp focus in the complex and remarkable life of Ethel Mulvany. Thanks to in-depth research and access to family members blessed with boxes of memorabilia, hers is a biography that marches along at the pace of a novel. No spoilers, but you can't help but wonder whatever will happen next to this woman who is tormented by mental health challenges, solitary confinement, divorce, and the sadness of postwar life. ▲

# Front-Line Worker

A family's postwar trials

John Fraser

## The Captain Was a Doctor: The Long War and Uneasy Peace of POW John Reid

Jonathon Reid

Dundurn

480 pages, softcover and ebook

PRISONER-OF-WAR ACCOUNTS OF THE Second World War fill a significant number of shelves, with some of the most shocking set in Japanese camps: Pierre Boulle's *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, from 1952; Gavan Daws's *Prisoners of the Japanese: POWs of World War II in the Pacific*, from 1994; Dave McIntosh's *Hell on Earth: Aging Faster, Dying Sooner*, from 1997; Alistair Urquhart's *The Forgotten Highlander: My Incredible Story of Survival during the War in the Far East*, from 2010; Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, from 2014; Louis Zamperini's two memoirs, both titled *Devil at My Heels*. The list goes on and on. It's not that these novels and memoirs are all identical — they aren't. But in so many of them, there is a pivotal sameness that gathers around well-documented cruelty, as well as the stoic courage that inevitably envelops many of the survivors. The field has gotten to the point where any addition, especially so long after the war, is bound to be regarded with some initial skepticism. This is not to diminish wartime brutality or to belittle the survivors, but one does wonder if any new POW narrative can reconfigure what's become something of a familiar story.

In *The Captain Was a Doctor*, Jonathon Reid has created a complex tale of his own father's experiences and takes us into territory rarely seen. John Reid was stuffed into a soldier's uniform just nanoseconds after he graduated from medical school in Toronto. Jack, as he was known, was then dispatched to Hong Kong, a posting "set in motion by a brief tropical medicine course he easily might have skipped."

Reid arrived just three weeks before the British colony's capitulation to the Japanese forces, in late 1941. The bare bones of his account track with what's generally known to have happened during that bewildering and ugly time. The treatment of Canadian POWs was particularly gruesome. A year after capture, just when things couldn't get worse, hundreds of Canadian and British military prisoners were unexpectedly evacuated to Japan for years of forced labour and further privation. Then the bomb to end all bombs fell in 1945.

But the bare bones are just there to hold up the tale of a man who started life with a proverbial silver spoon in his mouth, a man who nevertheless dreamed beyond his position of privilege. Born in October 1913, Jack was a strong

humanist and poet *manqué* who fell helplessly in love with the artistic girl of his dreams. He went into medicine with a dollop of altruism and then, almost before he could pick up a scalpel, was whisked away from his sweetheart's side to find himself in a world that was simultaneously cruel and an open canvas for a good man to conquer fear, sadism, and racism. The wartime transformation of Jack Reid was fashioned by necessity, dragooned as he was into a token POW leadership position, being the only officer among his men. Soon enough, and reluctantly, he was forced into playing God with people's lives, which ate away at his soul. But in the end, the role enabled him to teach



The dualities of a complex man.

basic decency to even his captors — and to come to the rescue when one was subsequently accused of war crimes. This is a big part of why *The Captain Was a Doctor* is so compelling and so different.

The *Enola Gay's* flight over Japan, in August 1945, barely gets us halfway through the book. We are then launched into Jack's postwar transformation and the inchoate — almost equally cruel — consequences of post-traumatic stress disorder. No one called it PTSD at the time, of course. It was understood that war could screw people up, but they were also expected to get on with their lives. Damage wasn't always easy to perceive at first, but Jean got more than a hint of what was ahead for her when her man

phoned on the way home. He reached her from Pearl Harbor:

Reid's low-key, almost cross-sounding murmurs were hard to understand, and what Jean could make out wasn't what she was longing to hear. His voice was clipped, giving the basics of where he was, how he was coming home, handling this surreal reunion, hindered by technical difficulties, the best he could.

"Say something nice to me," Jean finally blurted.

Reid's questioning garble was lost on her, so she said again, "Please, say something nice to me."

Her husband never managed that simple act. Although he had married the young woman he adored — although he returned to her in Toronto and although they had two children — something had shattered inside him. He never really managed "nice" again. And it was her heart he broke, a few years later, when she discovered that he had created an entirely separate family on the West Coast — the whole kit and caboodle — while completing his residency.

JONATHON REID, THE SON AND AUTHOR, HAS painted a picture of a handsome and charismatic father whose triumph over hate is matched by his mother's matter-of-fact and faithful triumph of never blaming the damaged man who abandoned her and her two young boys. Jean Reid never looked upon Jack as anything but a shell of the husband she had once loved so fiercely, a remote and broken stranger who had been changed in ways she could never fully fathom.

Structurally, *The Captain Was a Doctor* is adroitly balanced between war scenes and penetrating close-ups of the home front, between the postwar life in Toronto and the hidden one in Vancouver. The dualities support the complex nature of Jack Reid himself. The son comes to share the conclusion of the mother: that the war had changed the father so much that he was incapable of returning to normalcy. For the doctor, pre-war life was an existence forever shrouded; for his abandoned sweetheart, it remained a light that glimmered from further and further in the past.

Quite wonderfully, Jonathon Reid has deployed his well-honed skills as a filmmaker and teacher to describe a complicated time. His glimpses of the home front reinforce some of the horrible things that happened in the camps a world away. His meticulous research captures the afflictions that attended POWs and that his sensitive father was almost powerless to cure

without adequate medicines. And his detailed description of the war's end is mesmerizing. The son quotes his father, who quotes the camp commandant, who announces it's all over. This is a pivotal juncture in the account, and also something quite unlike the usual stories that have come out of wartime Japan:

It was of a different tone from any official speech we had heard before. [He said] we had been honourable men who had fought in a hopeless situation and that they honoured us, and there was no stigma to being a prisoner under such circumstances, and saluted us when he got through his speech.

The men thought that was really something. They felt the war must really be over now.

This speech and the commandant's tone is also a tribute to Reid's own disciplined decency, which even the Japanese recognized throughout his incarceration.

As for the author's own story of growing up within a dichotomized family, it is also moving. He offers evocative glimpses from a boy's perspective of the tensions that inevitably arose, including a telling surprise visit by his father to a Georgian Bay cottage, to collect his sons. The boys were there with family friends, Jack's former medical colleague and his wife, who simply could not bear to witness the unexpected arrival, such was her rage at the betrayal of Jean. (It's a scene that really bores into your consciousness.) And after his father's death, in 1979, it is Jonathon who has to negotiate with the Bureau of Pensions Advocates for a fair distribution of Jack's pension between the two widows, an event that finally brings him into contact with the other Reid family on the West Coast and that "sowed the seeds of this book."

◆

A GENERAL LACK OF BITTERNESS PERVADES *THE Captain Was a Doctor* and is what marks the book as a very special addition to the ranks of POW accounts. During his incarceration in Japan, for example, Jack Reid used all of his quiet resolve and dignity to pacify the expected cruelty of the prison commandant: rather educated and able to speak English, Masao Uwamori "would prove over time to be someone Reid could manipulate and bend to his views and aims. The positive consequences of this influence on Uwamori's thinking would be crucial to the men's survival." The doctor literally willed his captor into ordinary decency — reawakening the man's dormant compassion and bolstering the spirits of those under Reid's care. After the war, Uwamori was indicted on charges of "abusing prisoners and causing many of them to die" and was facing an almost certain execution. It was the doctor's written testimony that kept the noose from around the officer's neck — explaining how the commandant transferred the most sadistic guards and took risks to find better food and some medicines for his prisoners.

*The Captain Was a Doctor* is a powerful saga, especially at a time when charges of overt and systemic racism can be hurled about with abandon. It is an extraordinary and redemptive reminder of the basic decency in imperfect human beings that can come to the surface, despite a prevailing atmosphere of heightened distrust.

## Floriography for a Pandemic

You have sent me Blackthorn for difficulty  
and a stem-knotted bouquet of my favourite  
spring flower, the Chequered Fritillary,  
an emblem of persecution. Delivered  
a hanging pot of my beloved  
Lobelia, whose message is malevolence,  
and you have surrounded us all with  
Lavender for distrust.

You want from me a Peach Blossom  
to signify *I am your captive*, and another  
sign of surrender with a single persimmon —  
*Bury me amid nature's beauties.*

With Borage for bluntness, I send back  
Basil for hatred. To fortify my message,  
I tie together Wild Licorice with Belvedere  
both crying *I declare against you*,  
*I declare against you.*

For myself, I call the florist (she is still  
working — delivery only) for a beribboned  
nosegay of Lily of the Valley,  
like those sold on Paris streets  
for Mother's Day to mark the fragrant  
return of happiness. And though  
it's out of season, a spray of Mistletoe,  
which murmurs *I surmount difficulties.*

For us all, Snowdrops for hope, and a few  
Coreopsis for everlasting cheerfulness.  
Oats? asks the florist, surprised. Yes,  
I say, include a spray to bring us  
the witching soul of music. All these,  
no matter the cost.

Maureen Hynes

Maureen Hynes is the author of numerous collections, including *Sotto Voce*, a finalist for the 2020 Pat Lowther Memorial Award.

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# Stage Management

Fourteen fixes for a broken theatre

Marianne Ackerman

**I**N EVERY THEATRE MAKER'S DREAM, THE pandemic ends, the doors are flung open, and the patrons rush in, hungry for the visceral thrill of live performance. As the house lights dim, an actor speaks, and an ancient art form with a long history of reinvention enters a new golden age.

There's a nightmare version too: After months of isolation, people crave connection and conversation. But the virus, unlikely to be the last we'll know, has instilled a phobia of crowded spaces. Sitting in the dark beside strangers continues to feel risky, while at-home entertainment keeps getting better and better. Theatre is forced into the catacombs, where small bubbles of loyal fans gather around to carry on the ritual of familiar stories and shared outrages.

I believe theatre will survive; it always does. But, in the meantime, these cursed quiet days present us with an opportunity to imagine a better future — one where the hectic, insular activity of putting on plays becomes more important and commands impact and power it did not have when the lights went out in March 2020.

Who even remembers what it was like back then? Faux bravado ruled. Some iconic playhouses had already closed; others were struggling to find audiences. The boomers who propelled Canadian theatre in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s had reached an age when their donations were more avidly sought than their presence in the audience. "Youth and diversity" was the mantra. But now I wonder whether generational change and loosening the grip of white male management will be enough to kick-start a future with new voices and new visions.

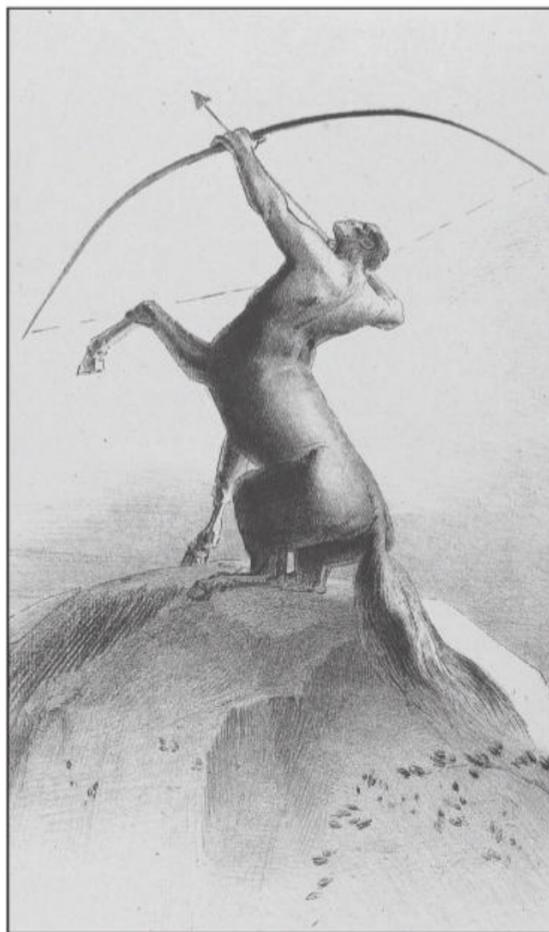
As theatre critic for the *Montreal Gazette* in the '80s, I covered an explosion of creativity on the francophone scene, a transformative experience that lured me to abandon a fat salary and launch Theatre 1774. For most of the '90s, I wrote plays, directed, and slogged to pay the bills. Since leaving the company to write novels, I've seen two of my plays produced at Centaur Theatre, in 2000 and 2015. Before the pandemic, I took annual theatregoing trips to London, often saw plays in Toronto, and made occasional visits to the Stratford and Shaw Festivals. But it's in Montreal that I've most closely watched a community of talented artists increasingly struggle against impossible odds, coping with outmoded institutional models and missing out on the audiences they deserve. Forced to scabble for grants and donations, they've made immense personal sacrifices to create.

The situation here — with all of its dramatic woes — has much in common with the scene in the rest of Canada. And a more sustainable path, I believe, begins with legacy theatres, specifically with their leadership roles, or lack thereof. I'll

stick to the stage I know best, but hope it can serve as an instructive mirror for others.

♦

FOUNDED IN 1969, CENTAUR THEATRE ENJOYS strong name recognition that dates back to the '70s and '80s, when new plays by David Fennario and Vittorio Rossi attracted tens of thousands of people. Centaur became a voice of Anglo Montreal through turbulent times. At its high point in the mid-'80s, it had two subscription seasons on two stages. But in 1991, in mid-recession, the founding artistic director, Maurice Podbrey, lamented in a *Gazette* interview that after two decades of growth, the theatre had racked up its first deficit. Still, there were 8,000



It's time to aim higher.

subscribers to an eight-play season, which sold some 112,000 tickets each year.

In retrospect, even the early '90s were the good old days. Today the subscription season has dropped to five plays (and may go to four). Subscribers number in the mid-2,000s. Seven of the last nine seasons ended with significant operating deficits. If this were still the '90s, we might link Centaur's misfortune to a sagging economy and the shrinking Anglo community. But with 780,800 first-language English speakers, Anglo Montreal is bigger than Winnipeg, where the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre operates on a \$12-million budget, thanks to Montreal-born Steven Schipper's sound management over thirty years. Since 2000, the population of Greater

Montreal has increased by 20 percent, to 4.2 million, more than 55 percent of whom are fluent in English. After several years of strong economic growth, Montreal had emerged as the fastest-growing urban economy in Canada by 2019, with a GDP second only to Toronto's.

Maybe Anglo Montrealers just don't want live theatre anymore? That idea is easily refuted. Since the entrepreneur Alvin Segal rescued the ailing Saidye Bronfman Centre, in 2007, the Segal Centre, located in the unhandy suburb of Côte-St-Luc, has been on a steep growth curve. Under the artistic direction of Lisa Rubin, revenue has increased to \$6.6 million, thanks to a year-round program of contemporary plays and ambitious new musicals. Hiring Rubin may have been Segal's best decision, but the octogenarian's considerable entrepreneurial skills, honed while building his stepfather's suit business into an international force, are all over the theatre's management structure and strategy. With only 4 percent of its pre-pandemic revenue coming from public subsidy (compared with 32 percent at Centaur), the Segal has become a hopping cultural centre, drawing accolades and audiences across age, ethnic, and language groups.

So, in the absence of another wealthy business genius with many rich friends, what would it take to restore Centaur Theatre's place in Anglo Montreal and make it an important cultural force once more? Here are fourteen ideas. Inspired by life in lockdown, they lean heavily on strategies for making new friends and getting back in touch with old ones. They're all aspirational fixes — and offered up as fodder for a much-needed discussion.

**1. Pursue growth.** The 2019–20 Centaur subscription season offered only fifteen weeks of theatre, including two shows brought in from elsewhere (and it was all cut short by COVID-19). A few short-run events filled out the brochure, including the Wildside, a mid-January festival of indie shows, and a public presentation of a new work. But these offered little revenue potential, and most local artists who participated were paid a fraction of union rates. Reducing high-risk, high-cost productions may be necessary to stop spiralling deficits, but it is bound to exacerbate Centaur's slide off the public radar. In financially challenged times, the only route to growth and excellence is by way of a reimagined community role, which requires top-tier diplomacy.

During the last two decades, Anglo Montreal's indie theatre scene has grown and matured enormously. A dozen incorporated companies, with combined budgets of \$7.2 million, offer an extraordinary range of high-quality professional shows, including outdoor Shakespeare, youth and children's fare, new Quebec plays, and

biting docudrama. The Black Theatre Workshop, for example, will soon celebrate its fiftieth anniversary. Montreal's bilingual Fringe Festival is a vibrant summer event, managed out of the MainLine Theatre, on Boulevard St-Laurent, a go-to venue for some fifty smaller companies.

While these companies have strong identities and devoted bases, none has the resources or opportunity to fully realize the audience potential of their most successful productions. But Centaur could curate a bill of top-quality work drawn from smaller stages. There would be no shame and much merit in a legacy institution showcasing the broader community's creativity.

The blunt fact is that without the vitality of smaller companies, there would be no pool of actors, designers, directors, and playwrights honing their craft and somehow managing to stay in this city. Whether these proudly independent troupes would be interested in being at Centaur is another question. Hence the need for diplomacy, and for a coherent "second season" that lets theatregoers know they are tapping into something special. And remember: nothing makes you hungrier for playgoing than having just seen a good one.

**2. Demolish, rebrand.** With its wide portico steps and stately columns, Centaur's home at the Old Stock Exchange puts on a brave face, but renovation is long overdue. Priority should be given to the performance architecture. The smaller 241-seat space — unceremoniously named Centaur 1 — has an anchored plywood balcony that looms over a shallow stage, which faces a steep bank of fixed seats. The view from side rows is annoyingly restrictive. The entire space would be far more effective as a black box with movable chairs and stage. If social distancing is required, everything could easily be reconfigured.

Gutting Centaur 1 is both a practical and a symbolic necessity. A new name would help, too. Something feminine — the Mermaid? — could counterbalance the growly presence of a half man, half beast that's embedded in the corporate brand. (The 422-seat Centaur 2 needs a serious rethink as well, but that's a longer story.)

**3. Move the office.** Not until 2000, when my play *Venus of Dublin* was produced at Centaur, did I

first see the administrative bowels — a jumble of desks jammed into one corner of the ground floor. On my way to the artistic director's windowless nook, I passed pale people hunched around a photocopier, a strangely funereal atmosphere, as if nobody dared talk out loud.

The pandemic has emptied many great commercial spaces throughout the city. Now is the perfect time to move all but building-related employees to some spacious, well-lit spot in one of Montreal's creative neighbourhoods. Consolidated under one roof, rehearsals, publicity, and administration can build experiences that exude a welcoming aura. That should also make it easier for staff to cope with increased usage of the performance spaces by other companies and creators.

**4. Feed and water the guests.** On a trip to London last February, I agreed to meet a friend for drinks at the Royal Court Theatre, on Sloan Square. Arriving shortly after 5 p.m., I was surprised to find the restaurant-bar filling up and assumed there was an unscheduled event. Not so: all those people were there for a play, which didn't start until 7:30. In normal times, the best London theatres are meeting places, alternative pubs. The Young Vic has a thriving all-day restaurant on the main floor and a spacious bar on the mezzanine. You can get Prosecco at West End intervals. London has acknowledged an inescapable fact: our info-entertainment-sustenance cycle is now 24-7.

The pandemic has thrown many of Montreal's best young foodie entrepreneurs out of work, which makes this a great time to replace Centaur's menu of chips, chocolate bars, and ho-hum house wines with inventive, creative fare. Celebrating and engaging our local foodie innovators might even incentivize their friends and fans to check out a play.

**5. Reach out to families.** Most parents will do cartwheels on behalf of their precious kids. Why not get serious about children's theatre on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, timed so that adults can see the main show while their little ones visit a big-tent performance in the lobby? A juicy family show over the holidays would appeal to grandparents entertaining far-flung family. (We know there's potential here: last year,

when I took my grandson to *The Nutcracker*, an underwhelming experience at \$250 for three tickets, Place des Arts was packed.) Montreal has two successful young people's theatre companies whose work merits more exposure. Mainstage family entertainment at Centaur should happen at least once a year.

**6. Single out singles.** Going solo to the cinema is a thing to do, a perk of having spare time. The same cannot be said for theatre, which is deeply imbued with the Noah's Ark syndrome. Why be shy about our need for human connection (or the fact that even married people can find it hard to get a date for the theatre)? Why not create a special solo price for designated performances, along with a post- or pre-show drink?

The tone of most theatre promotional campaigns oscillates between begging and boasting: We need your support! We are essential! Very little effort goes into imagining what it's like to be an actual member of the public, which is ironic since, at its core, the art form is all about pretending to be other people.

**7. Sell more tickets (and stop giving them away).** I was surprised to open the royalty statement for my 2015 play, *Triplex Nervosa*, and learn that of 8,825 people who saw it at Centaur, almost 20 percent got in free with comps, vouchers, and passes. Early in the run, brisk ticket sales prompted a one-week extension. Even in that fifth week, though, 300 tickets were given away. As the only member of the team whose pay depended directly on the box office (10 percent of net), I calculate the largesse cost me about \$5,000. More to the point: if that many tickets are given away during a popular play, what happens when tickets aren't moving?

Most Toronto theatres offer "industry" discount tickets to people working in theatre, as do many indie companies. But discounts are a neutral gesture; a loyalty program aimed at creatives would have much more potential. A paid membership could offer a range of perks. Why stop with discounted tickets? Why not add a season launch party? An invitation to attend the annual general meeting? Opportunities to discuss the dramatic arts with the board of directors?

The free-ticket syndrome, while it might appear generous, actually keeps people at a

# 'MEMBERING AUSTIN CLARKE

Paul Barrett, editor

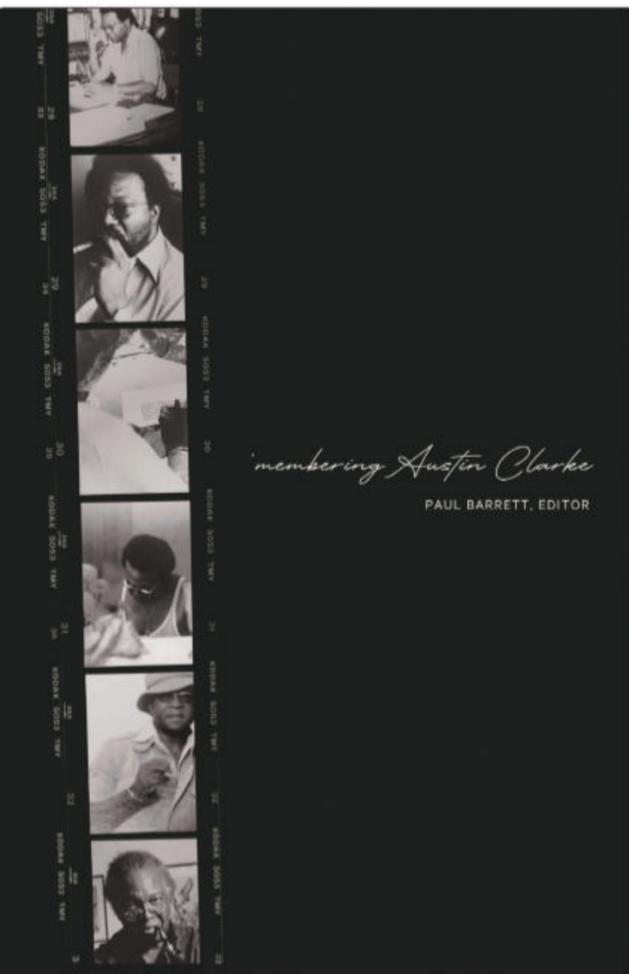
*'Membering Austin Clarke* is a wonderful collection — a both discerning and poignant tribute to one of Canada's great writers, which will be a landmark work in Austin Clarke criticism for years to come.

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distance. It signals an entrenched feudal system: the reigning king or queen confers perks on a lucky few, chosen from the hordes of starving artists. The way forward is to treat creative types as stakeholders, to cultivate a sense of belonging and participation, to ask for their support.

**8. Open up to books.** Whenever the novelist Louise Penny publishes a new mystery, it sits comfortably on the *New York Times* bestseller list for weeks. She's just one of many Quebec writers working in English — all part of a lively Anglo literary scene celebrated by an annual awards gala organized by the Quebec Writers' Federation (with its 780 members) and the multilingual Blue Metropolis literary festival, launched by the writer turned publisher Linda Leith in 1999. Still, Anglo Quebec authors and their publishers face the number-one problem confronting the book industry everywhere: how to get copies in front of potential readers.

Last year, Centaur spent \$373,123 on publicity to get a few thousand people into the building, coats off, and seated. Why not offer these same people an opportunity to arrive early and browse through a Quebec-themed bookshop? If Centaur management can't handle the burden of becoming a bookseller, surely the local literary types could make this modest proposal happen. Even if the effort doesn't contribute significantly to theatre revenues, it would help attract the attention of smart readers and writers, who otherwise might not consider going to a play.

**9. Reach out to music.** The Anglo Montreal music scene is often cited internationally for its originality and vitality. Cheap rents no doubt played a

role in creating this incubation hub, and while those days are fading fast, a slew of established musicians live here. Music, of course, is one of the art forms hardest hit by the destabilizing power of the internet, yet creative types have found ways to build revenue streams by touring and giving concerts in large venues. They've become masters at building their fan base through social media and internal organization. Theatre can — and must — learn from this sector.

At the same time, commissioning these amazing local talents to compose scores for Centaur productions is an excellent way to give plays a palpable Montreal feel, while tapping into their considerable followings. I also know this from experience: threading Patrick Watson's music throughout *Triplex Nervosa* led to considerable attention among his multi-generational fans.

**10. Create buzz through conversation.** The days of the Olympian critic are over. Most remaining theatre reviewers are struggling freelancers, and sharing economic fragility with the medium you cover does not exactly inspire trenchant commentary. Across the arts, the gatekeeper role has shifted to the juries who award lucrative prizes. This arrangement may work for books, which remain on sale well after publication, but most plays have long since closed when the awards are handed out. In the absence of comment in the press, some theatres blow their own horns, but who believes self-praise?

In our fragmented world, no single voice can judge the merit of a work of art or steer the myriad of potential publics toward something they might actually enjoy. So creating conversation should become part of a theatre's outreach

effort: recruit a panel of avid theatregoers that represents different ages, backgrounds, tastes, and genders. Post their bios online. Invite them to see the plays. Record moderated conversations. Publicize it all widely. This theatrical version of the CBC's "At Issue" panel could end up creating more buzz than yet another blizzard of self-regarding tweets from management.

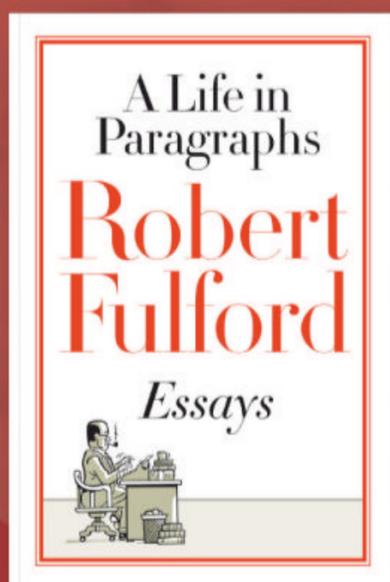
Traditional theatregoing is a passive activity. As the explosion of Zoom meetings has shown, listeners crave interaction — a chance to voice their opinions and hear what others think. An official comment panel is only the beginning of what could become an ongoing conversation between audience and creators. Post-show talk-backs are old school. What's needed today is an app that allows patrons to comment instantly and that aggregates those comments for a range of promotional purposes.

**11. Get a bus.** Montreal's francophone scene is so much larger and more varied than Anglo Montreal that comparisons are rarely useful. But there is one practice on the French side that could open up considerable potential for growth: touring the Island of Montreal, and possibly further afield in the province. Francophone Quebec theatre has a well-developed circuit, where hit plays from Montreal stages can have a hundred or more performances before returning to the city for a second run.

The francophone path has been decades in the making, but surely Centaur could start on a modest scale. Both Geordie Theatre and Youtheatre have developed touring circuits that account for the bulk of their revenues. It's hard to imagine that the mid-winter Wildside Festival

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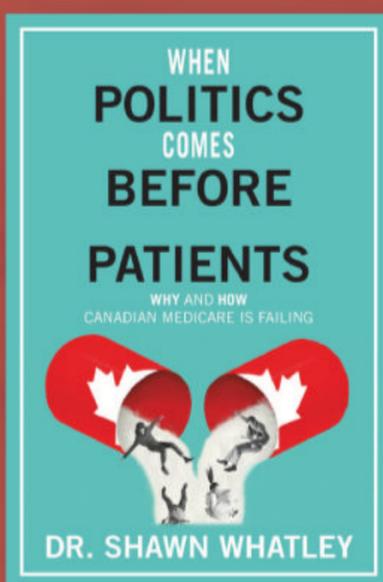
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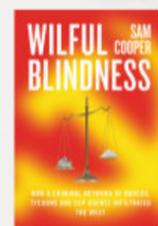
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brings in new theatregoers or advances anyone's career. These shows could easily be sent on tour instead — paving the way for larger works from the main stage. Touring would enhance the Centaur brand outside the downtown core and provide more exposure for Montreal actors.

**12. Go public.** The single greatest threat to the non-profit scene is the dreaded founder's syndrome. Many companies were willed into existence by visionary leaders, aided by waves of hard-working supporters (girlfriends, wives, ex-wives, philanthropists), and these founders made sure their boards were composed of loyalists. After a founder's departure, boards might drift or seize control, but mainly they stay invisible — and become unapproachable.

Non-profit boards are responsible for governance. But how does a citizen taxpayer go about speaking truth to power? Who even is the power? As far as I can establish, the fourteen men and women on Centaur's board of directors recognize two duties: to choose the artistic director when the job is open (by way of an Ottawa-based headhunter, most recently) and to fundraise. The AD then works for the board in what, from the outside, appears to be a closed circle, a Vatican-style structure. This airtight relationship sets the tone for everything that happens at Centaur, by ensuring the governors remain isolated from the environment in which the theatre must live.

Consider another paradigm: the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. When the board chair recently undertook to fire the director general and chief curator, Nathalie Bondil, a public outcry ensued. At a subsequent meeting, a slate

of four powerful women ran for positions; three were elected by a paid-up membership, and the ex-chair was voted off the board. Clearly, a feudal system is not the only way to govern a publicly funded arts organization.

**13. Revise the CEO job description.** Traditionally, combining the roles of artistic and executive directors has been considered necessary to prevent messy clashes between the artistic vision and financial responsibility. In changing times, however, running a building-based theatre has become hugely complicated; it's unreasonable to expect that any one individual could have expertise or interest in all of the wide range of tasks required to keep an arts organization afloat — especially a working artist with an eye on his or her own creative career. (Indeed, since Podbrey's retirement, in 1997, his three successors have each taken time away from their \$100,000-plus jobs, and from Montreal, to direct plays elsewhere.) Many theatres, such as Toronto's Canadian Stage, have acknowledged the burden by dividing the job in two, handing over the business side to an executive director. In reality, this division can simply mean giving the general manager a new title.

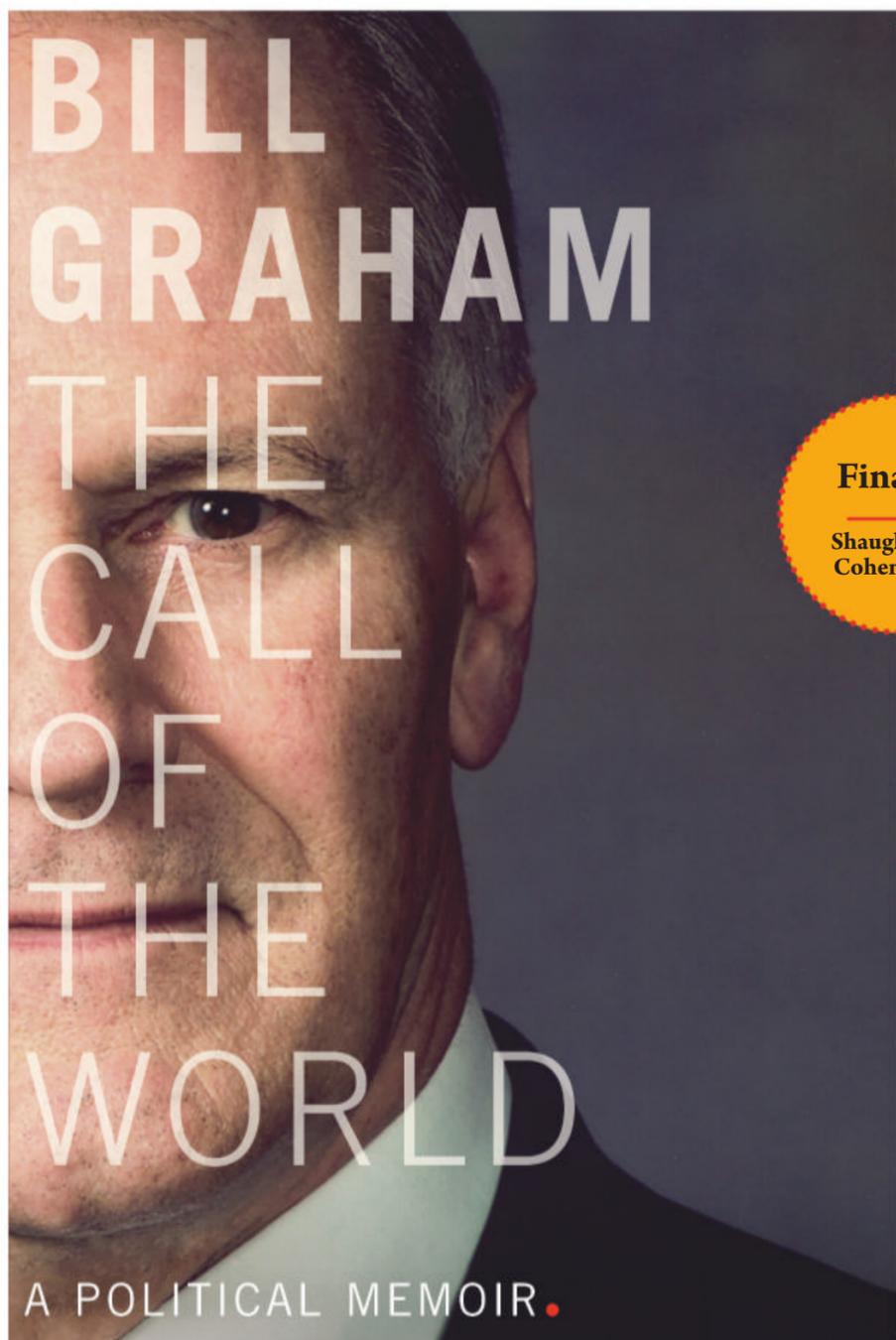
It's time to recognize that theatre management is itself a *creative challenge*, one that requires diverse skills, a deep knowledge of institutional context, and an intimate awareness of how a very particular research-and-development-based organization works. To move forward, Centaur needs a creative director, tasked with reimagining how the theatre could play a more effective role in the community while taking into account the city's particularities and history.

**14. Learn to know and embrace virtual space.** The eternal beauty of theatre resides in fundamentals that have not changed since at least the Greeks. People gather around, one person stands to tell a story, another chimes in, and it's a play. Each performance is a unique transitory experience, living on only in human memory. It's this simplicity that draws talented people to invest vast chunks of their lives in the making of theatre.

It's also what blinds those makers to the ongoing revolution in communication technologies, which are key to the survival and importance of the art form. Devising a comprehensive digital strategy is essential. Marketing is not only or even primarily about selling tickets; it's about standing out, engaging audiences, setting up transactional experiences that will prompt people to reveal themselves and commit. The purpose of a digital marketing strategy, and indeed the goal of creative management, should be to create better theatregoing experiences, expand revenue streams, and stimulate growth.

Convincing people to sit quietly in the dark while actors speak should be considered but a pause in the larger conversation between theatre and its public. Otherwise, exit stage left to the catacombs.

FOR LEGACY THEATRES SUCH AS CENTAUR, THE time has come to acknowledge that every state-funded theatre is a public institution that exists within a democratic social system, a marketplace, and a particular community. After the pandemic, the way forward begins with demolishing old feudal habits and structures. It's time to lower the drawbridge, open the gates, and air the place out.



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# No Country for Young Women

The latest from Ava Homa

Keith Garebian

## Daughters of Smoke and Fire

Ava Homa

Harper Perennial

320 pages, softcover and ebook

**T**HE KURDISH PEOPLE HAVE A LONG history of denied legitimacy, which has forced their authors to write in languages other than their own. Consider the writer and filmmaker Kae Bahar, who survived torture as a teenager and an attempt on his life by ISIS. After fleeing to England, he published *Letters from a Kurd* in 2015. Set in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, the account (regarded by many as the first Kurdish novel in English) follows a young boy struggling with his non-traditional gender identity — in a country of brutal sexual repression. He finds escape through foreign films and by composing imaginary letters to his hero, the actor Clint Eastwood. Bahar's text serves as a meaningful introduction to Ava Homa's own debut, *Daughters of Smoke and Fire*, the first novel in English by a female Kurdish writer.

Unlike the much older Bahar, Homa was born in Iran. But like him, she writes in exile and in a foreign tongue. Homa, who now divides her time between Toronto and San Francisco, previously published short fiction, including "Lullaby," a tale about the young Kurdish activist Farzad Kamangar. After imprisonment and torture failed to crush his inner life (he turned his suffering into rhapsodic poetry), Kamangar was executed. Nevertheless, his words shook the foundations of a theocracy that continues to feed on division, fear, and despair. With *Daughters of Smoke and Fire*, Homa has again used his story and his trials to fuel her writing's incendiary power.

HOMA'S NOVEL BEARS FIERY WITNESS TO THE LIVES and struggles of a stateless nation. In the prologue, a woman is alone on a mountain at dusk, with an invisible boot pressed against her throat. This imagined suffocation conforms with her sense of a "stifled future," as she bemoans "the daily cruelties of living as a woman in *La'nat Awa*, the damned place." Her name is Leila, and the "damned place" is the Kurdish region of Iran. It is a setting where, by law, a man's life is worth twice as much as a woman's; where the government, through its official policy of "Enjoining Good and Forbidding Vice," encourages children to inform on adults who don't comply with religious or political edicts; where relatives must pay a bullet fee to retrieve the corpse of an executed family member; where,

in short, Kurds have a "criminalized identity." But the story is not simply a list of complaints. The opening expands into a tale of witness, where a persecuted collectivity is represented by members of a family whose lives pulsate with urgent passions.

Names provide an additional layer of symbolism within this story of defiance. Leila's beloved younger brother, Chia, who becomes a political martyr, has one that means "mountain." Their father, or Baba, whose badly scarred back is a canvas of torture, imprisonment, and hunger for justice, is Alan Saman, a name that in Arabic denotes a folkloric flag-bearer. Their mother's name, Hana, means "hope, flower, happiness," contradicting her volatile narcissism and domestic displeasure. Leila's best friend, Shiler ("lily"), and her mother, Joanna ("beautiful"), are both ill-fated — especially Shiler after she joins the peshmerga in the mountains. And the handsome young man who eventually becomes Leila's saviour is Karo, which means "strong" — an epithet he earns after redeeming himself for his unintended role in Chia's tragic fate.

The book spans Leila's childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, building from the

## "Bearing fiery witness to the lives and struggles of a stateless nation."

persecution and atrocities she meets with in Iran to her daring attempts to find and free her imprisoned brother and the subsequent threats to her own safety. Half Kurdish, Karo only gradually emerges as a hero when he engineers Leila's escape to Canada, first by means of a sham marriage, to get her past the Iranian authorities, and then by arranging her refuge with his wealthy mother in Toronto. Over these tension-filled sequences, the story deepens as an exploration of freedom, identity, and finally love.

While the narrative unfolds with genuine force and suspenseful momentum, Homa's characterizations can stray into clichéd or strained metaphors. Red poppies are described as dancing in the breeze; there is "a garden of anguish"; the past is compared to "a colony of mosquitoes." When she focuses on particulars of Kurdish affliction, Homa is on firm ground, but when she attempts to raise the dramatic pitch of her plot, she is guilty of exaggeration, even melodrama, as when Leila admits that "an overpowering urge to scream my story, to expel it from beginning to end, seized me. Suddenly

I could see the heads of all those Kurds crushed beneath tanks."

So, too, the novel's structure, which jumps between the narrations of Leila, Alan, and Chia, seems unsure of itself at first. The father's narrative is the shortest and is related in the third person, keeping him at some distance from the reader, yet simultaneously allowing for an objective focus on his trauma. (However, one could wonder how a third-person perspective fits into what is essentially a first-person account.) Chia's diaries and notes are incorporated dramatically into his section, but it is Leila who emerges as the ultimate storyteller, and through her the author clarifies her intent.

The Canadian part makes up the final fifth of the book and feels tightly pressurized. Leila, by then in her mid-twenties, realizes that her new home has its own reprehensible record of racism and injustice: "Neither of the countries was mine. One had crucified my brother and threatened to kill me. One had killed its own natives at one point and I wasn't sure it had a place for the likes of me." Nevertheless, she makes an assiduous attempt to learn English, and she matures sexually, listening to her body yearn for Karo; but her frustrations with the language, her disapproving mother-in-law, and the ghosts of her past are expressed naively. As Leila learns the facts of Karo's accidental role in her brother's capture and his sincere efforts to honour Chia's memory, her doubts fall away and the two marry — properly this time. Homa

rushes through Leila's university studies in order to solidify her role as a political activist. She eventually becomes a celebrated filmmaker who documents Kurdish suffering.

Throughout, Homa's focus remains fixed on Iran. The ending is shaped with dark metaphors — life as landfill waste or compost — but it ultimately points to optimism as Leila, pregnant with her first child, anticipates a future of "blithe abundance." Her parents, who had shown her very little understanding or acceptance before their own exile to Canada, relish the spectacular success of *Warrior Butterflies*, Leila's film about three female Kurdish freedom fighters. The epilogue shows her parents watching a televised broadcast of the film, the bitter tumult of their past conflicts put aside. A single tear streaks down Baba's face as he composes an email with the subject line "My daughter." Such sentimentality threatens to turn the story into a stereotypical weepie, dulling the sharp edges of a narrative about hard-earned identity. Yet the book survives its flaws. *Daughters of Smoke and Fire* is a groundbreaking work of "warrior" witness. ▲

# Home Is Lagos

Francesca Ekwuyasi's debut novel

Brett Josef Grubisic

## Butter Honey Pig Bread

Francesca Ekwuyasi  
Arsenal Pulp Press  
368 pages, softcover

AS YOU MIGHT EXPECT FROM ITS title, *Butter Honey Pig Bread* features a banquet of food. There's baked mackerel (burned due to an absent mind), fresh guava (nibbled on until the "knobby, slimy ball" is "all sucked clean"), and a lovingly prepared triple-layer cake intended to mend a long absence with chocolate and caramel. There's even a cat named Coca-Cola. Across the novel's four sections, meals are shared, summoned from memory, or missed, and recipes are recounted step by step. Francesca Ekwuyasi's appealingly rich debut celebrates the comforts and rituals of dishes, especially as they recall the tastes of home.

Home is Lagos — a hugely populous metropolis about which the characters harbour different shades of ambivalence or a desire to escape. Though she now lives in Halifax, Ekwuyasi gives readers an immersive experience of the city of her birth: a "voracious beast," both ugly and beautiful. Taiye and Kehinde, estranged twins, return from their separate globetrotting lives — shifting between Paris, London, Halifax, and Montreal — to take care of their ailing mother, Kambirinachi. What follows is a long-delayed and much-feared reunion as each attempts to make fragile peace with difficult events from the past.

*BUTTER HONEY PIG BREAD*, WHICH WAS LONG-listed for the 2020 Giller Prize, provides a complex and touching story of family and of the persistent regrets that fracture its bonds. Taiye, a queer woman whose desire, the "swell of want" in her lower belly, threatens to control her, is already home by the time the novel opens. As she waits for her sister to arrive, she disguises her apprehension with the preparation of an elaborate feast. While Taiye is the cook of the family, Kehinde is an artist. Juxtaposed against her twin sister, Kehinde appears more conventional, more insecure: "I'd hated my body for a long time, hated all the ways I felt it had betrayed me." She is the "I" voice of the narrative — which is divided among the three women in rotating chapters. Until now, she has built a careful, managed existence a hemisphere away, reserving only a small space for her mother and sister. Kehinde makes the journey from Montreal to Lagos with her husband, Farouq, whom neither Taiye nor their mother has met.

Kambirinachi is categorically more complicated. Before we have a chance to won-

der about her mental well-being — the reason why her "untethered" daughters have come home — Ekwuyasi sets up Kambirinachi's story through a poetic rendering of a west African traditional belief. The half-page prologue launches a motif that plays out until the novel's final chapter: "We are Kin here, in the in-between place where we live. We are one being, eternal, moving in rotation to the flesh realm only because we must. As sure as the tides, as the sunrise, bound to the rhythm of its particular realm."

The disembodied "we," who call themselves *Qgbanjes*, circulate as voices in Kambirinachi's head and act as narrators of her tale. "We sing reminders to the 'I's," they state, referring to those



Sharing the comforts and rituals of home.

(such as the twins' mother) who have left the in-between place in order to taste the "unbearable misery of being in this alive body indefinitely." *Qgbanjes* are spirits who bring misfortune to families when they die as children, only to be reborn again in an endless cycle. Kambirinachi chooses instead to stay. The "episodes" she experiences — are they madness or magic? — are a constant burden as she fears the fallout of her decision. Her daughters regard their flighty, delicate mother with a mix of bewilderment and concern: "She is a vast garden of water-hungry flowers in a land of perpetual drought."

From Kambirinachi's troubled childhood in rural Nigeria to the twins' years of school, work, and relationships across Europe and Canada,

each of the women faces dilemmas and heartache, giddy love and bouts of despair. Taiye sees herself as promiscuous, believing that she has had too many lovers: "She found herself too lustful, too gluttonous. She desired too much." Her sister is "engulfed in a pitch-black hollowness" following a violent sexual experience during her adolescence. Kehinde pines for invisibility and nurses "festering feelings" about her seemingly untouched sister — "my quiet partner, closer than my shadow" — who didn't come to her aid. Their mother struggles between fealty to this world and an adjacent one.

Alongside these three distinctive characters, Ekwuyasi has created a whole set of cinematic circumstances for them to move through. Nightclubs, culinary school, spiritual awakenings, pregnancy, marriage, affairs, benders, jobs, and new cities, experiences, and friends are all rendered in fine detail. There's setting and plot by the yard, but the book does not feel lengthy or bulky; the story's pace is consistent and balanced. Each character is equally important to the narrative, and the amount of material devoted to their perspectives meets the Goldilocks criterion: just right.

*Butter Honey Pig Bread* looks past food alone to assert the primacy of appetite. Across the various generations, we encounter a small village's worth of questioning, journeying characters. Often they are in search of immediate metamorphosis, to find something alchemical. For the protagonists, it's a wish to elevate the everyday — through some magical combination of ingredients — so that it isn't quite so onerous.

Whether drawing attention to the consumption of alcohol and drugs (in an intentional overdose, in one instance) or pointing to a vivid memory of a man's "tobacco-stained teeth," Ekwuyasi consistently highlights a desire for transcendence. Primarily, it's a carnal vision, a pleasant if warily hedonistic one whose dualism — life as difficulty and pain, substances (narcotics, warm bodies, a spicy meat stew) as short-term relief — is as old as time.

Doors to the next world open as *Butter Honey Pig Bread* closes. The composite dishes come together and old pains are cast aside; nevertheless, the future isn't entirely set. Ultimately, as mother and daughters are spread between Abeokuta, in southwest Nigeria, Lagos, and Tangier, they are separate yet in a kind of communion. Their paths and their choices are their own, but Ekwuyasi gifts them a commonality of experience that holds each in the others' hearts.

For a thoughtful novel about wandering and questioning, this alone-but-together status has the feel of a satisfying happy ending. The book is a hearty, far-ranging reminder about "the substance, the very matter, of life." ▲

## Metaphor Surrendered

**I**N ONE WAY, I HAVE BEEN WRITING MY memoir since I was fifteen, when I was diagnosed with a novel variant of an extremely rare leukemia, called natural killer, which had no known survivors. When I returned to high school after missing the end of grade 9 and the beginning of grade 10, I enrolled in a writing class. All of my ideas were metaphors for the fight between life and death that I felt still playing out within my body, my bloodstream.

With everything that I wrote over the years about my experience, directly or indirectly, I was haunted by the feeling that the subject matter was too narrow, too navel-gazing. Friends and family who read these early attempts tried to convince me otherwise.

"Are you sure it's bigger than itself?" I would ask them.

"Yes," everyone urged. "Yes."

I didn't believe them.

But when I became pregnant, unexpectedly, having been told that conception after my treatment would be unlikely if not impossible, I had a strong sense of the protagonist in the story of my life shifting. I was becoming the witness as well as the narrator. The book could be about this *becoming*: the transition from sickness to health, from girl to woman, from woman to mother. As a mother-to-be, I suddenly felt a greater empathy for my parents, for what they would have gone through with their only child on the edge of death for nine months, or ten years (until the chance of relapse is gone), or her whole life — however you choose to see it.

Within the pages of *Natural Killer* lies the story of how another work almost came to be. I had first tried to write a novel about my experience in which the protagonist died. She died because I was supposed to die, because people die, children die — that's life. But it didn't feel right. I poured years into that draft, and it never came together. Then one friend asked a question that nobody else had: "Did you *want* to die?"

Or maybe she said it like this: "Did *you* want to die?"

Either way, the answer was obvious to me: no. Maybe I just needed to write the truth, then.

My memory of the later part of my treatment, everything that followed the fourth round of chemo, is fuzzy, if not gone. After the fifth round, I got very sick — sicker than I'd been up to that point. My body was a machine, simply being told what to do: kill the cancer by killing everything that grows. So while my four-month-old son napped in his stroller beside me, I went back through my hospital records, all the thousands of pages of digitized handwritten files stored on computers in the basement of Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children.

I went over the doctors' and nurses' notes to fill in the gaps. It felt like reading a suspense novel where I wasn't sure what would happen to the main character. I hoped she would live.

"Significant worsening of pulmonary picture in face of continued poor clinical picture," my medical record read on October 22. And the next day: "Clinical deterioration overnight. Infectious Disease team to examine: pt is clinically worse." Nurse note: "Parents v. anxious. Many services in to see pt." And on October 24, nurse note: "Harriet nervous + scared."

Just as I did while I was a patient, I had to rely on my parents and doctors to write this memoir. Their recollections are woven throughout the narrative, adding a chorus of voices that I hope make my book "bigger than itself." For it's really the story of a community.

My parents had kept a journal to document the many days we spent in the hospital, but also to put the situation into their own words. My initial decision to write my experience as fiction was an attempt to take power over it, too. Does that make this non-fiction account a surrender?

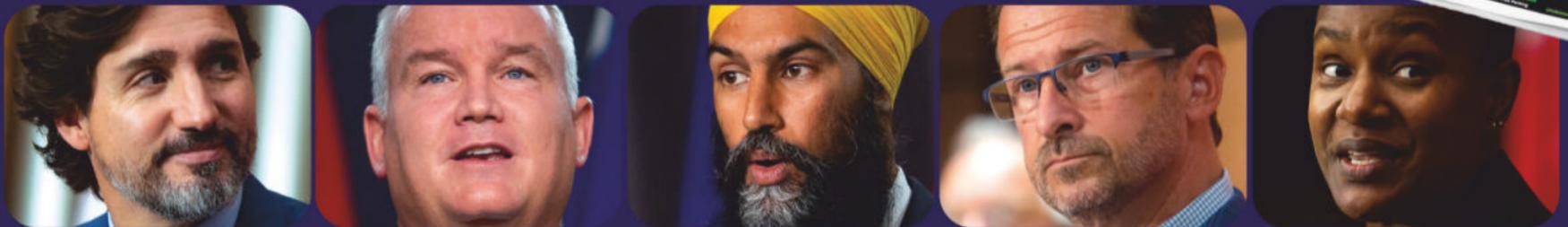
Making my book felt at turns like being a composer, an archivist, a curator, a psychotherapist. I had never thought of the process of writing as cathartic, but as soon as I finished, I found I could stop telling myself what had happened. And that was an incredible release. I surrendered metaphor and just wrote the truth. I let go of the story and gave it to you. 

*Harriet Alida Lye is the author of Natural Killer: A Memoir.*

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