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Literary Review of Canada

A JOURNAL OF IDEAS



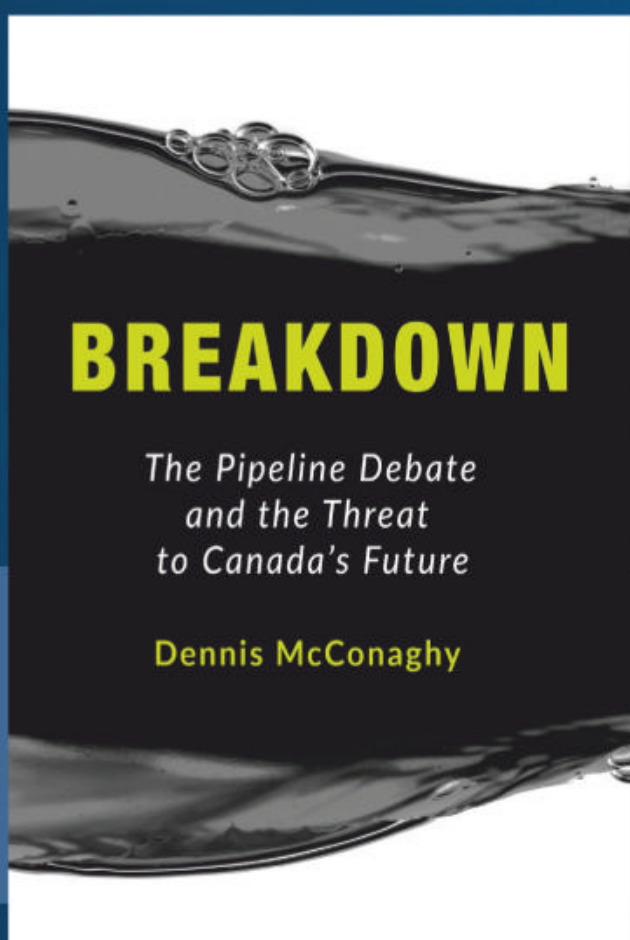
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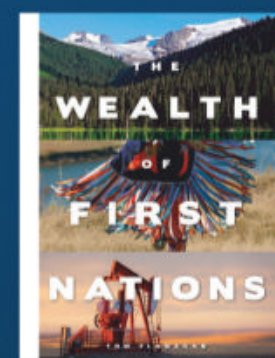
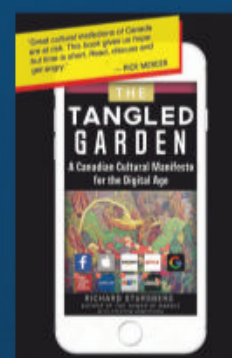
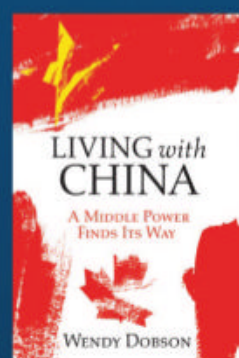
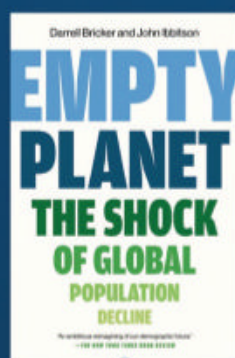
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OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Katherine Ashenburg will publish *Her Turn*, a novel, next year.

Sheima Benembarek is a recent graduate of the King's College master of fine arts program.

Kelvin Browne is the executive director of the Gardiner Museum, in Toronto.

David Cayley is the author of the forthcoming *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey*.

Keith Garebian just published *Mini Musings: Miniature Thoughts on Theatre and Poetry*.

J. L. Granatstein writes on Canadian political and military history.

Scott Griffin is the founder of the annual Griffin Poetry Prize.

Ron Hikel has worked with political parties in the United States, England, and Canada.

Alex Himelfarb was Canada's ambassador to Italy from 2006 to 2009.

Tom Jokinen is a frequent contributor to the magazine. He lives in Winnipeg.

Kevin Keystone reads and writes in Toronto.

Chad Kohalyk is working on a book in Japan.

Sarah Wylie Krotz is a professor of Canadian literature at the University of Alberta.

Gayatri Kumar is a freelance writer in Toronto.

Liam Lacey occasionally brushed with fame as the long-time film critic for the *Globe and Mail*.

Matthew Lombardi recently co-founded *GroceryHero Canada*, to support front-line workers.

Peter Mansbridge has a new book, *Extraordinary Canadians: Stories from the Heart of Our Nation*, due out in November.

Joe Martin is historian of the Albany Club, the last private Conservative club in Canada.

Jennifer O'Connor is working on a master's in social and political thought.

Cecily Ross is author of the novel *The Lost Diaries of Susanna Moodie*.

Bardia Sinaee is a poet in Toronto.

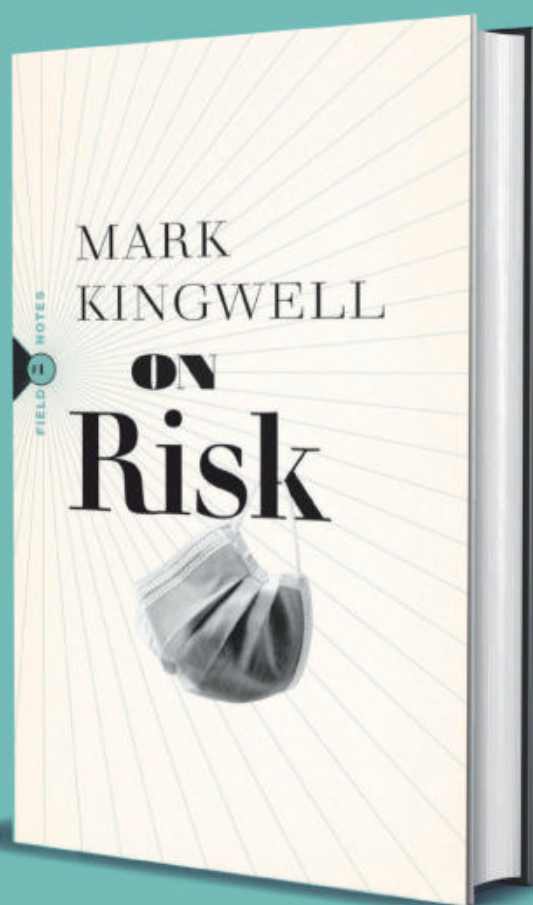
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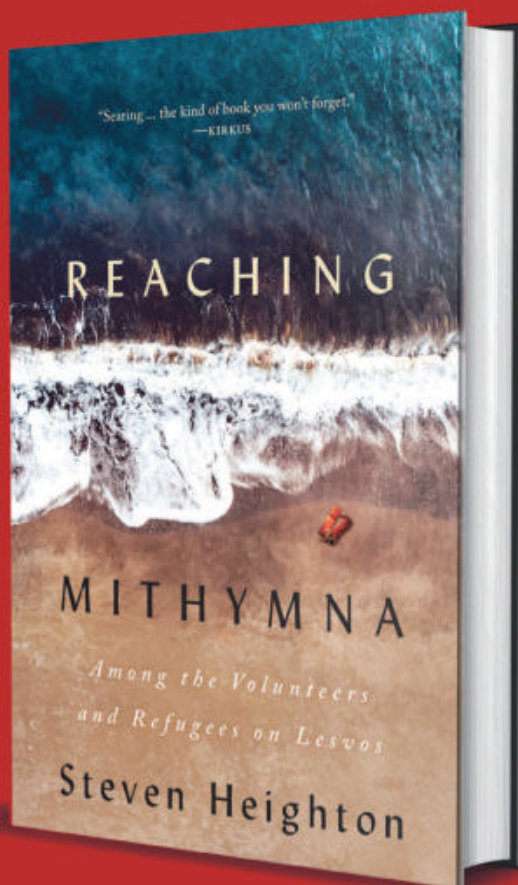
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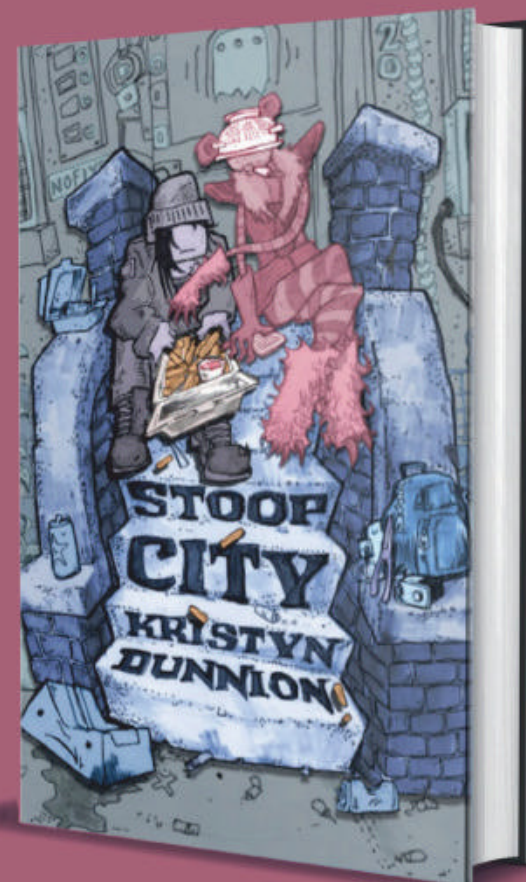
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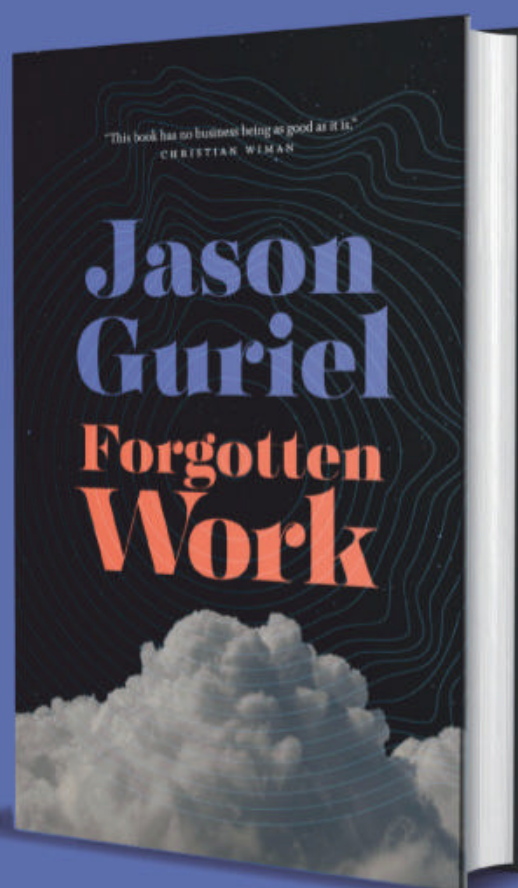
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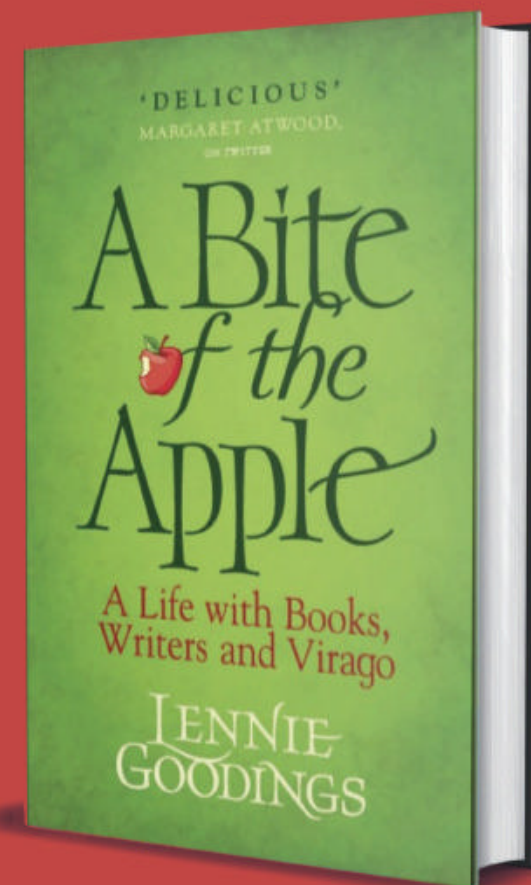
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A Divided Nation

I WAS IN IQALUIT THE LAST TIME I WATCHED a movie on VHS. It was mid-December 2014, and while I was a whiz at downloading and streaming content back in Toronto, Nunavummiut didn't have access to broadband internet service. What they did have was the local Northmart and a bin of used videotapes. My hosts were on a Kevin Costner kick at the time, and after a day of dogsledding in Sylvia Grinnell Territorial Park, we picked up a copy of *Dances with Wolves* for \$1.

In tech time, six years is about as long as *Dances with Wolves* is in movie time — an eternity. But even that hasn't been long enough to make a material difference when it comes to internet service for much of rural and northern Canada. Consider Mumilaaq Qaqqaq, the lone MP for the largest electoral district in the world. Despite some modest upgrades for Nunavut's twenty-five communities in 2019, the NDP's northern affairs critic still found herself unable to load a simple Wikipedia page this summer, and one of her staff members couldn't send an email. "We are in the capital of Nunavut and this is a (bad) joke," Qaqqaq managed to write on Twitter. "How am I to virtually connect to parliament."

In 2016, when residents of many Nunavut communities had internet speeds only up to 2.5 Mbps, the CRTC stated that all Canadians should have access to download speeds of at least 50 Mbps and upload speeds of at least 10 Mbps. Four years later, and after a string of fawning press releases, Northwestel's Tamarmik Nunalitt service is no faster than 15 Mbps (and often non-existent if it's raining). In Manitoba, Broadband Communications North has just secured federal funding to offer upgraded service — at a whopping 10 Mbps — in five northern communities, while hundreds around Dawson City, Yukon, will be entirely without internet access when an aging Xplornet satellite is retired sometime next year. And all throughout the North, the data that is available is expensive and capped.


There is a great divide in Canada, made all the more apparent by the pandemic, which has forced so many of us to work, learn, meet, and even legislate remotely. When I join a Zoom meeting from home, I do so with speeds that regularly top 500 Mbps. But, as of 2018, 58 percent of rural and 65 percent of First Nations households in this country have no option for

high-speed internet; only 15 percent of remote households can access the minimum CRTC standards. True broadband still doesn't exist anywhere in Nunavut, which is the only jurisdiction in Canada without a direct fibre optic connection (though one is at last in the works, by way of Greenland).

The long-standing and growing gulf between Canada's digital haves and have-nots harms health care, mental well-being, remote learning, economic opportunities, tourism, and basic democratic participation for far too many. It also impacts enough federal ridings in every province and territory that it could swing an election, if only it were made a defining issue.

The presidential race between Donald Trump and Joe Biden has sucked up a lot of oxygen, with our news ecosystem giving plenty of attention to the gong show that is the debate over the United States Postal Service. The USPS connects Americans in a way no other institution can, and it's absurd that this connective tissue has become a political lightning rod in the run-up to November. But, outside of northern media outlets, far too little attention has been given to the absurdity that is our own broken connection.

I am increasingly unconvinced the United States can ever bridge its deep political divides, but we are in a position to bring Canadians together in a truly transformative way. The issue of broadband service — whether delivered through dedicated satellites or much-needed fibre or something entirely new — deserves debate here that is no less vigorous and public than the controversy around the postal service in Washington. Just imagine if "broadband" is the word on every MP's lips after the September Throne Speech, whether they find themselves on Parliament Hill or on the campaign trail.

In its final report, *Canada's Communications Future: Time to Act*, the Broadcasting and Telecommunications Legislative Review called on Ottawa to "foster innovation and investment in high-quality, advanced connectivity in all regions of Canada, including urban, rural, and remote areas." That was in late January, before COVID-19 aggravated a pre-existing condition and made the recommendations of the six-member panel all the more urgent. If we're going to spend our way out of this pandemic, as it seems we might try, let's at least spend what's necessary to finally connect us all. 

Kyle Wyatt, Editor-in-Chief

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Furthermore

RE: *False Notions*

by Mark Nkalubo Nabeta (July/August)

THANK YOU FOR PUBLISHING MARK NKALUBO Nabeta's excellent essay. And thank you, Mark Nkalubo Nabeta, for writing it. Your words have inspired me to educate myself and to take action against racism. Once again, I thank you both.

Barry Cook
Whitby, Ontario

RE: *A Northern Light*

by Sarah Rogers (July/August)

HAVING ENJOYED THE OPPORTUNITY TO WORK with Inuit at hockey schools in the mid-2000s, I think about them from time to time. This article put me back in Iqaluit and Kuujuaq. Sarah Rogers writes so well, I feel like I am there again.

Tom Callaghan
Newmarket, Ontario

RE: *Labyrinth*

by Sheree Fitch (July/August)

I READ SHEREE FITCH'S BOOKS TO MY OWN CHILDREN and to my primary students, as a teacher for thirty-five years. Delightful! Fun! Tongue twisters! I never imagined I'd be reading a book she wrote that helped me heal and grieve and have hope.

@newfuneze
via Twitter

RE: *Harsh Treatment*

By J. L. Granatstein (July/August)

I THINK J. L. GRANATSTEIN, IN HIS REVIEW OF *Civilian Internment in Canada: Histories and Legacies*, doth nitpick excessively in his critique of the use of the word "internment." Interestingly, he seems to provide no alternative term for what happened to Japanese Canadians and to others with ancestry in enemy nations. My dictionary defines "internment" as the state of being interned: "to restrict to or be confined within prescribed limits."

I still remember my father coming home from work one day in 1942 to announce, "The RCMP took Tak Toyota this afternoon." Tak ran a fruit and vegetable stand on the outskirts of my hometown, Creston, British Columbia. He spent three years in a camp at Slocan, restricted in almost his every move. If that's not internment—having your home and business ripped away from you and being exiled to a guarded camp at a remote place—I don't know what in

hell it is. Showing much fortitude, Tak met his future wife in the camp and returned to Creston after the war. His son, Ron, has served four terms as mayor, a credit to both the steadfastness of his family and the decency of the town's voters.

Ray Argyle
Kingston, Ontario

RE: *The Passport*

by Stephen Marche (September)

STEPHEN MARCHE HAS TOUCHED ON THE CORE and values that I myself, as a Canadian living abroad for the past thirty years, could never put into words. I have felt what he was saying but could never express it to those who have asked, "Do you ever miss Canada?"

Yes, of course I do! And for most of the reasons that Marche articulates: the security, the infrastructure, the Crown corporations, the views, the human instinct of survival during the -40 C winters.

I've lived in the United Kingdom since 1991; the launch of my restaurant businesses was well received by the Brits. We've had award-winning success. Labour cost, corporate taxes, start-ups with private funding, and the sheer volume of dine-in eaters—it just seemed easier here back then.

But after raising three kids and approaching my retirement, I linger on where my heart wants to find that rocking chair on the porch. It's nowhere else but Canada. I shall be back for all those reasons Marche describes and more.

Andre Blais
London

I LOVE IT WHEN I FEEL LIKE SOMEONE HAS OPENED the top of my head, scooped out the tangle of thoughts and put it all into a nice, orderly, comprehensive document. Good work! Thank you.

Julie Seiersen
Nanaimo, British Columbia

THANKS, STEPHEN MARCHE, FOR ARTICULATING being Canadian, and reminding us of our good fortune in holding that slim, blue, and elegant booklet.

@beSPEAKco
via Twitter

"CANADA WANTS TO KEEP YOU IN YOUR PLACE," writes Stephen Marche, in his meditation on Canadianess. And yet he is unable to see the violence signalled by that statement.

The orderliness he unpacks—that Canadian love for institutions, that internal logic of self-preservation—works itself out not just against the landscape but against the bodies of its others. There is so much masculine colonial logic at play in our elucidations of national structure—in the taming of the wilderness, in the battle of orderliness and "culture" against "nature." Marche draws a straight line from settler-colonialism to Canadian institutionalism. That should disturb us more than it comforts, and not just for its enervating effects on Canadian excellence. The stakes are way higher than productivity or cultural innovation.

Administration, orderliness, paperwork, passports—these things sublimate the violence that undergirds a modern nation-state. They are the most anodyne manifestations of something omnipresent and unfriendly, often deadly. I can tell you—as could Colten Boushie and Chantel Moore and Regis Korchinski-Paquet, had they lived—that Canada's penchant for orderliness masks more violence than Marche can imagine.

For many of us, the slim elegance of that blue passport represents a false promise. We are not safe, even when we have been accepted "into the garrison." It was simply not built for us. (Some of us—like temporary foreign workers in southern Ontario—are made precarious, in service of that stalwart Canadian stability.)

We should take "a good long look at ourselves now," as Marche says. But let's make sure we can actually see what lurks beneath the surface.

Gayatri Kumar
Toronto

THIS IS A FABULOUS PIECE. FOR ME, AS A KIWI living in Australia, the feeling of home resonates. Fortunately, I am privileged to enjoy Australasia—two countries where, like Canada, we have made the best of the institutions we inherited from the British.

Canada survived the 2007–08 global financial crisis with well-run and regulated banks. And like Australia and New Zealand, it seems to be making a reasonable fist of COVID-19. All the while, the United States has been on a downward spiral on many fronts for many years.

David Airey
Melbourne

IN MY THIRTY YEARS AS A CANADIAN EXPAT, ONLY two pieces of writing have captured for me, and for curious Americans I know, what it is exactly that makes the two places distinct—neighbours but worlds apart. The first is *Let's Talk about Love: A Journey to the End of Taste*, which explains Céline Dion and the whole French Canadian

thing with more humour and empathy than you'd think the subject demands. And the second is Stephen Marche's piece about our fierce love of system, the belief in freedom as the freedom to rot, and the renewed power of the Canadian passport.

@caitlin_thomps
via Twitter

I APPRECIATED STEPHEN MARCHE'S POINT THAT THE Canadian passport has taken on new resonance in the COVID-19 era, but I found his overall take on Canadian identity frustratingly predictable. He either forgets or ignores the fact that our "orderly" country was founded on the violent, ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands. Many Indigenous world views see nature not as "obliviating" or "lifeless," but as a relative worthy of care and as a storyteller worth listening to. Settler Canadians such as Marche and myself would do well to heed these perspectives, since the belief that nature is lifeless is exactly what has enabled us to destroy it. I am disappointed that Marche had to resort to hackneyed colonial tropes in order to make his point.

Christina Turner
Toronto

I ENJOYED "THE PASSPORT" VERY MUCH. I DON'T agree with everything in it, but of course it is written with generalities that are used for effect, not accuracy. But I must say, having a Canadian passport at last is a huge relief, and though I may never need it again, and may therefore never need to carry it on my person, it will always be near to my heart. I'm grateful far beyond words to be living in Canada as a Canadian.

When I came here in 1970, Canadians were immersed in the question of "Who are we?" They had gotten as far as "We're not British and not American." We've come a long way since then, but as Pierre Trudeau indicated, there isn't one definition or characterization that fits all. Like Quakers (which I am), Canadians are often described by what they aren't. And though I certainly do not deny that racism exists here, and I know not everyone embraces the beautiful mosaic that is Canadian society, at least we do

not require that everyone get into the same pot and be melted together (and then hop out of the pot and rant on about individualism).

Marche asserts that we love orderliness and "samey-samey" in Canada. In some ways, that is so, but we are quite free to be individuals within that orderly framework. Contrast that with the United States, where individualism is somehow the enemy of diversity, an oxymoronic stance that defies rational analysis, especially considering the aforementioned melting pot.

I agree that our prime minister staying home as he enjoined us all to do — working there as he looked after his three children, with his wife self-quarantined — was an excellent example of "we are in this together, and we will get through this together." Justin Trudeau has the same feet of clay that other leaders have, but his first acts in the face of the pandemic were not denial and nose-thumbing and dangerous lies and actions.

Marche also states, "The entire tone of our public life has been shaped by institutionalism." Here I would argue that this is only partially true and only partially not good. Having lived into adulthood and voted throughout adulthood in the U.S., I would say that the individualist, competitive, "everyone can be a millionaire in the land of opportunity" falsehood is not a better way to run things. Not everything has to escalate, not everything has to be more and more profitable, bigger, more powerful, more voracious. It is reasonable that some things level off and simply stay healthy, like trees and people and robins and five-lined skinks do, all of which would be grotesque and unsustainable if they just kept on growing and growing and growing.

I think that "institutionalism" is what made possible the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and though we are very far from achieving the goals of its recommendations, we have at least made a start — and people have been heard. Marche rants a bit about Canadians' propensity to "become strong, durable, productive, uncomplaining cattle," and the lack of artistic scope or innovation in Canada, and here again I disagree. As an independent freelance storyteller, I have thrived in Canada, without the support of institutions or even much in the way of orderliness. We are generally mavericks of various sorts, but we are a nice lot cuz we're Canadians.

I know other Canadians who are far less sanguine about this country than I am, and they are entitled to their views, certainly. And I am not without a certain level of cynicism myself; I do see the flaws of governments, institutions, economy, and "national character" (if you will), but as Marche says, "Others have made me safe. I am grateful."

Our world is imperfect. My chosen country is imperfect. Human beings are imperfect. I am most certainly imperfect, but having lived in both the U.S. and the U.K., I have to say that I am grateful — grateful beyond imagining — to live in this imperfect Canada.

Carol Leigh Wehking
Cambridge, Ontario

RE: *Wanderings*
By Jean McNeil (September)

I ENJOYED IMMENSELY JEAN MCNEIL'S MOVING piece, and her gifting me yet another aunt. I can see how confusion might have ensued.

For the record: I am not a nephew of Lota de Macedo Soares, though Lota is herself aunt to Leyla da Silveira Lobo, who married one of my mother's brothers, Carlos Augusto. I am Leyla's nephew. (Leyla can be seen reciting poetry in many YouTube videos.) I went to the United States with my family in 1963, when I was fifteen. Bishop was still living in Brazil. Though my parents corresponded and saw Bishop constantly when she visited the Bay Area, I was to see her again only after childhood when, nominated by professors at UCLA, I was invited to interview for the Society of Fellows at Harvard in 1975 and looked her up. The society accepted me as a junior fellow, and I spent much time with Bishop during my three years of residency in Cambridge. Her references to me in her letters were not to the boy I was but, for better or for worse, to the young man in his late twenties in the '70s.

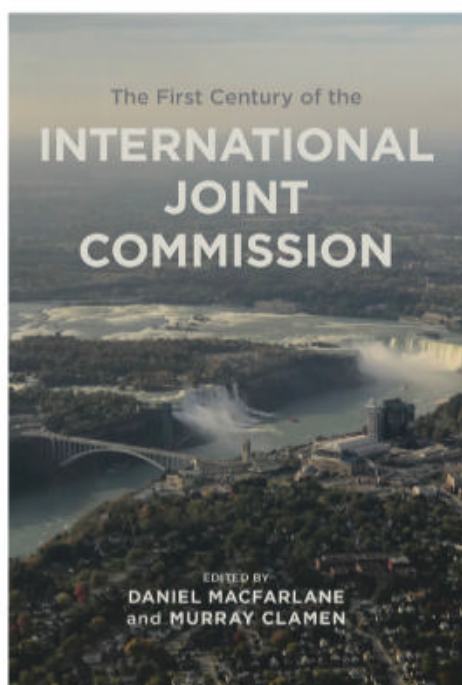
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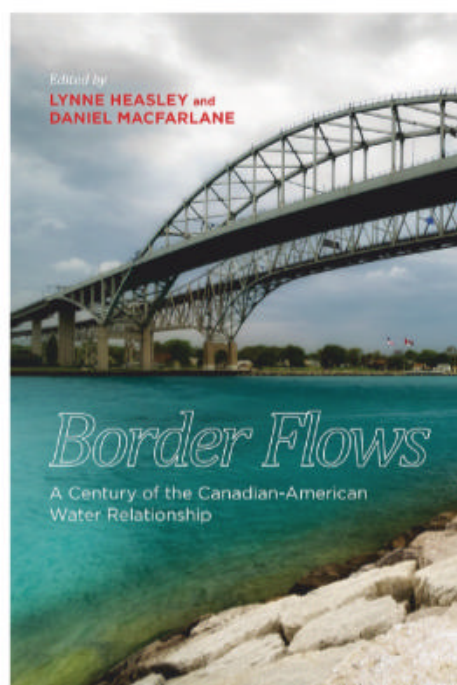


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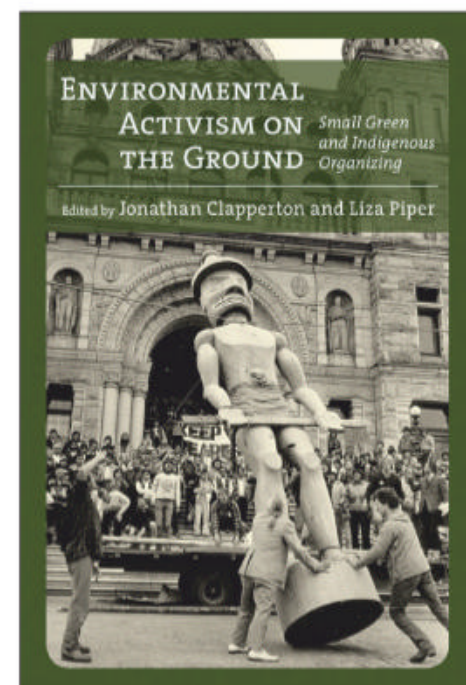


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This Story Is Mine

Why I'm finally telling it

Cecily Ross

This, I think, is the cost of telling, even in the guise of fiction. Once you do, it's the only thing about you anyone will ever care about. It defines you whether you want it to or not.

—Kate Elizabeth Russell

Who would have thought something that happened that long ago could have such power?

—Alice Sebold

IN JUNE 1964, A FEW WEEKS BEFORE MY thirteenth birthday, I was raped by a man old enough to be my father. As shocking as that sentence is, its construction is flawed. As a writer, I try to avoid using the passive voice, because, say William Strunk and E. B. White in *The Elements of Style*, “the active voice is usually more direct and vigorous than the passive.” That is the kind of writer and person I would like to be — direct and vigorous. But if I rewrite that sentence in the active voice, it becomes: “Gerry Graham raped me when I was not yet thirteen.” In effect, this becomes his story, not mine.

From time to time, I have tried to write about what happened all those years ago, first in short stories and eventually in a novel. (Fiction protects you, my agent once told me.) Yet those manuscripts remain unpublished, languishing in a file on the desktop of my computer — a file entitled “Junk.” You see, the desire to disappear and the need to be seen have been at war in me for a long time.

To this day, my memories of the rape and its aftermath fill me with shame. My reluctance to write openly about those years is a symptom of a lifelong passivity, a condition not addressed by Strunk and White. And these two things — shame and passivity — are inextricable. The shame I have carried with me for over five decades is a direct result of the passivity that so often attends the sexual assault of children. I am not talking about violent rape here, the jump-out-of-the-bushes kind. I am talking about the systematic grooming and manipulation of girls. In literature, I am talking about fifteen-year-old Pamela Andrews, about twelve-year-old Justine, about twelve-year-old Dolores Haze and fourteen-year-old Holly Golightly. In life, I am talking about the girls that Jeffrey Epstein and his cronies trafficked and abused. I am talking about myself and all the others who have remained silent. Our silence comes from the dishonour of victimhood. My shame is that I did nothing to stop the abuse. My passivity is my shame.

That shame has permeated every aspect of my life, a feeling so reflexive that I cannot intellectualize it away. In spite of everything I know about sexual assault and hebephilia, my sixty-nine-year-old fingers tremble as I force myself to



We — women and the girls we once were — are claiming agency.

type his name, a name I still cannot say aloud. Gerry Graham was the stable manager at the Caledon Riding Club, hired by the board of directors that included my father. Graham — who is surely dead by now — was forty-five and married with four children, two of them older than I was. What began as playful wrestling in the stable after lessons soon became inappropriate touching and then, in a matter of weeks, intercourse. It was a progression I was completely unprepared for. No one ever told me it was okay to say no. That summer, the summer I turned thirteen — the last summer of my childhood — my siblings were eleven, ten, seven, and two. My parents were good, kind people, but they were busy. Gerry Graham and I were left alone. A lot.

◆

BEFORE #METOO EXPLODED THREE YEARS AGO, AND women around the world began telling their stories, it never occurred to me to call what happened, on that summer afternoon on a yellow vinyl divan in the clubhouse, a rape. But the voices of all those other women made me realize, more than half a century later, that, yes, it was in fact a rape, a traumatic and terrible event that was just the beginning of a relationship that would last two dreadful years. I was a girl looking, as are we all, for love, and I threw myself into it completely. Falling in love with my abuser may have been my naive way of claiming my story, having the illusion of agency, an antidote to passivity.

When Jeffrey Epstein was first convicted in 2008 — a conviction that resulted in a thirteen-

month sentence, most of which he served at his Palm Beach office — many in the news media referred to his victims as “underage women.” But they were girls. This idea, that girls are somehow women in disguise, a disguise meant to confuse and entrap men, is pervasive in our culture, and it has been with us for a long, long time.

Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* is considered by many to be the first English novel, and it sold a lot of copies when it was published in 1740. It is the story of a young housemaid, seduced and assaulted by her employer, Mr. B. The novel is epistolary. In one of her letters home, Pamela describes how Mr. B. forcibly kissed her. When she runs away, he blames her: “What a foolish hussy you are!” In Richardson’s account, it is Pamela who has power over her seducer, not the other way around; it is as though her innocence is the weapon she uses to trap Mr. B.

Innocence, too, is the power Humbert Humbert endows upon Dolores. He refers to her as his nymphet: “Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travellers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic.” Drayton and Drummond used the term “nymphet” in seventeenth-century poetry, but it was Nabokov who gave it today’s meaning of “an attractive and sexually mature young girl,” as the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it. As though there is any such thing. Innocence is Holly Golightly’s power over the much-older Doc; it is

Walcott

"You want my advice?

History's a vise.

(My thought's gold — not tripe.)

Africa got mined

For *Black* merchandise.

Cleopatra's Nile —

Napoleon's miles

Of mud, his red strides —

Enmity's empires —

The ethnic quagmires —

Countless genocides —

Rights nixed by blood-rites —

Peoples gone haywire —

Chronicles that rile

And urge homicides

(Recall Hitler's hire;

Next, Jews — deuced — got diced)... .

I can be precise.

The *Truth* must suffice:

History's blood-rife.

This, I've versified."

George Elliott Clarke

George Elliott Clarke is the author of Portia White: A Portrait in Words and other books, and is a former Canadian Parliamentary Poet Laureate. "Walcott" comes from the larger sequence "Nine Scribes' Lives."

seventeen-year-old Lara's power over the politically connected Komarovskiy. It was, I suppose, my unwitting power over the groom, as though I were a young horse in need of taming. The power of "underage women" is, of course, a lie. A lie perpetuated by men.

Male authors don't write novels about sex with girls the way they once did, but women do. Well before #MeToo, we had Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* and Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*. In each, the young protagonist is anything but powerful. In the former, the teenaged Susie Salmon is raped and then killed by her assailant. In the latter, fourteen-year-old Celie, whose father rapes her repeatedly, writes in her first letter to God: "He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it. But I don't never get used to it." Unlike Pamela, who eventually marries Mr. B., most contemporary fictional victims do not live happily ever after. Except perhaps in Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, where women have real power — the ability to electrocute men and take over the world.

Today, the sexual abuse of girls is often framed as one of the perks of male status. The Jeffrey Epsteins and Harvey Weinstains of the world get away with it, because their wealth and influence protect them. But ordinary men from all walks of life also commit sexual abuse against girls with impunity. My abuser was neither wealthy nor powerful. He was a stable manager in rural Ontario, a horse trainer. Who or what was protecting him? He was past middle age when I first encountered him. Almost certainly, I was not the first girl he assaulted, but rather one in a long trail of abuse. I later learned of two, possibly

three others in my community with whom he was having sex. Even his wife knew.

So how did he get away with it for so long?

◆

ON A STARRY, STARRY NIGHT IN LATE AUGUST, my father discovered what was going on. His anguish was profound, and I have never forgiven myself for the pain I caused him. I don't know what happened next, only that Gerry Graham and his family moved away within days. My father grounded me for three weeks, and he never again mentioned what had happened. Three years ago, my mother died, and I'm still not sure if she knew. My father did what he thought was the right thing, shielding me and our family from stigma and scandal. But what he actually did — as did the fathers and mothers of other girls compromised by men like Gerry Graham — was enable him through silence. And silence is complicity. My father's silence and my own (except for those third-person attempts at fiction, as if I were writing about someone else) were evidence of society's general willingness to look the other way. We were all complicit.

In the 1960s, one of the punishments for statutory rape was flogging. Gerry Graham would have known this. It did not deter him. Maybe he'd been found out by other fathers who, like mine, thought they could protect their daughters and themselves with silence. After we were discovered and my father sent him packing from our privileged little community, Gerry Graham took breathtaking chances to continue his assaults on my life. I believe he knew from experience there was little likelihood of his ever being charged. He took risks that I, a teenager in love — with shades of Juliet and Ophelia — engaged in willingly. I deceived my father for nearly two years. And though now I marvel at his failure to see what was happening, my guilt for betraying his trust is equal to my shame.

By the time the abuse ended (another story for another day), I was fifteen — bruised and battered emotionally and relieved it was over. I was also determined to forget everything that had happened to me, to consciously push it out of my mind forever. But the shame and self-loathing did not forget me. A peculiar numbness, a passivity, set in, and from then on, I simply did whatever came next. I began dating a boy in high school. I confided in him, and was grateful that he — that *anyone* — still wanted me, damaged as I was. After a lacklustre high school performance, I went to university and obtained a bachelor's in English with a minimal amount of work. After graduation, I married the boy from high school. We were twenty-one. I took the first job on offer, with a bank. Three years later, I got pregnant as a way of getting out of a nine-to-five I hated. I don't remember ever considering what I wanted or where all this was heading. Marriage and children seemed as good a place as any to hide. By the time I was thirty, I was the perfect facsimile of a perfectly content stay-at-home mother of two little girls. For a time, I thought the forgetting was working. I was wrong.

◆

IN 1979, WOODY ALLEN'S *MANHATTAN* DEBUTED IN theatres. When I first saw it, I was blown away by its power and elegance — the Gershwin, the black and white cinematography, the romance. Praise for the movie was unequivocal, and years

later the Library of Congress deemed it "culturally significant." That the plot concerned a seventeen-year-old girl's relationship with a forty-two-year-old man barely registered with anyone at the time, including me. A year earlier, the forty-four-year-old director Roman Polanski had fled to England and then to France to avoid prison, having been convicted of the statutory rape of a thirteen-year-old. He would later tell the novelist Martin Amis, "If I have *killed* somebody, it wouldn't have had so much appeal to the press, you see? But... fucking, you see, and the young girls. Judges want to fuck young girls. Juries want to fuck young girls — *everyone* wants to fuck young girls!"

In the ensuing decades, Polanski enjoyed the vocal and widespread support of Hollywood and even of his victim, Samantha Geimer. Today, I wonder if, like me, she felt culpable — that she was in some way to blame. Sympathy for the director's plight grew as the years passed, even as his legal battles and his struggle to avoid extradition continued. The point is that in the 1960s and '70s — and into the '80s and '90s — there was something about older men having sex with girls that, while not exactly acceptable, was at least understandable, and in that sense, maybe even okay as long as it wasn't *your* daughter who was being abused.

It's a different story now. Today, it seems unlikely Polanski will ever return to the United States. And as great a movie as *Manhattan* is, for better or for worse, it has lost its sheen. #MeToo has changed the way we see these things. The lens we look through is no longer an exclusively male one. The stories have become ours. We — women and the girls we once were — are claiming agency. We are becoming the heroes, tragic or otherwise, of our own lives.

◆

IN 1981, MY FATHER DIED. HE WAS THE AGE THAT I am now. Hardly a day goes by that I do not miss him, but I also know that his death opened a gap in the thicket of my inertia, a gap that became a portal to change, to another kind of life.

Once both my children started school, I returned to university. After fourteen years away, the study of literature was a revelation, a kind of rebirth. It was then that I first read Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*, and its impact was seismic. Del Jordan's interior world so paralleled my own as a teenager and young woman that I could hardly breathe as I turned the pages. Over and over again, I felt that jolt of recognition you get reading something you've known all along but didn't know you knew. It was the joy of having a thing previously only intuited fully articulated for the first time. Going back to school was like waking up from a long, long sleep. But change can be painful, and as much as I thought I was figuring things out, I wasn't.

Soon after my father's death, my marriage to my high school sweetheart ended. Children, of course, are the collateral damage that comes with divorce. We did our best, their father and I, but it can never be enough. By leaving, I added another layer of pain to all our lives. Still, out of endings come beginnings. I took a job with a daily newspaper in our small town, and that job led to one at a bigger paper in a bigger place, and then to national magazines and newspapers. I was ambitious, determined to make it in the world of journalism despite my late start. The girl whose life had been so brutally interrupted was someone else now. In her place stood a

woman of purpose and ability — passive no more. These were difficult years, and I failed as often as I succeeded. But I wanted to be a role model for my daughters, and I hoped that when they grew up, they would understand that the sacrifices I made, I made for them. I was reading Marilyn French and Carol Gilligan and Doris Lessing and Gloria Steinem and Germaine Greer. I thought I could have it all. If this had been a fairy tale, I would have been well on my way to living happily ever after. But no. Because the story of abuse is never-ending: shame and self-loathing are trolls hiding under a bridge, waiting for the chance to pounce.

In any fairy tale, there has to be a prince, but the problem with princes is they don't always come to the rescue. Mine was a man I met in the pre-internet days through a companions-wanted ad in the *Globe and Mail*. Superficial, handsome, charming, and on the prowl, he wasn't a monster, but I managed to turn him into one. On and off for the next decade, as I struggled, a single mother trying to build a career, I found myself inexplicably ensnared in a relationship with a man I did not love or even respect, a man who did not love me. As much as I wanted out, I could not leave. Something beyond my control, something frightening and obsessive, was keeping me there. I now understand that I was, perversely, re-enacting the events of my childhood. I was like a horse fleeing back into the burning stable, refusing to leave my groom.

Earlier this year, Lili Loofbourow reviewed Miriam Toews's *Women Talking* for *The New York Review of Books*. In describing "post-traumatic futurity," she wrote what I now know to be

true: "We don't have much of a vocabulary for what happens in a victim's life after the painful past has been excavated." Even for the abused, Loofbourow posits, life goes on, and all their future relationships will be haunted by their trauma.

Eventually, like the affair that foreshadowed it, my relationship with the dark prince petered out. Those ten lost years made me understand what a quicksand passivity can be. Miraculously — and I do mean that it has seemed like a miracle — I met and married the true prince I am still with twenty-three years later. But the grip of the past is stubborn, and even he has not been able to save me. I know I will never be truly free of this.

◆

SO WHY HAVE I FINALLY PUT MY AMBIVALENCE aside? Why do I feel such an urgency to tell my story now?

In February, just as the world was beginning to shut down because of the pandemic, I travelled to New York to spend a few days with my daughter, Leah, who lives in London and who, like me, is a writer. We had hardly spoken in several months, because of a disagreement over a book that she wanted to write — a book about my adolescent encounter with Gerry Graham.

My daughters know what happened, and Leah has read my unpublished novel. She saw my experience as great material, even as a chance for us to connect. I saw it as the appropriation of my story, a story that, if it is to be told at all, should be told by me. After much negotiation, I asked her to drop the idea, and I assumed she had. But over martinis at the hotel bar, she told

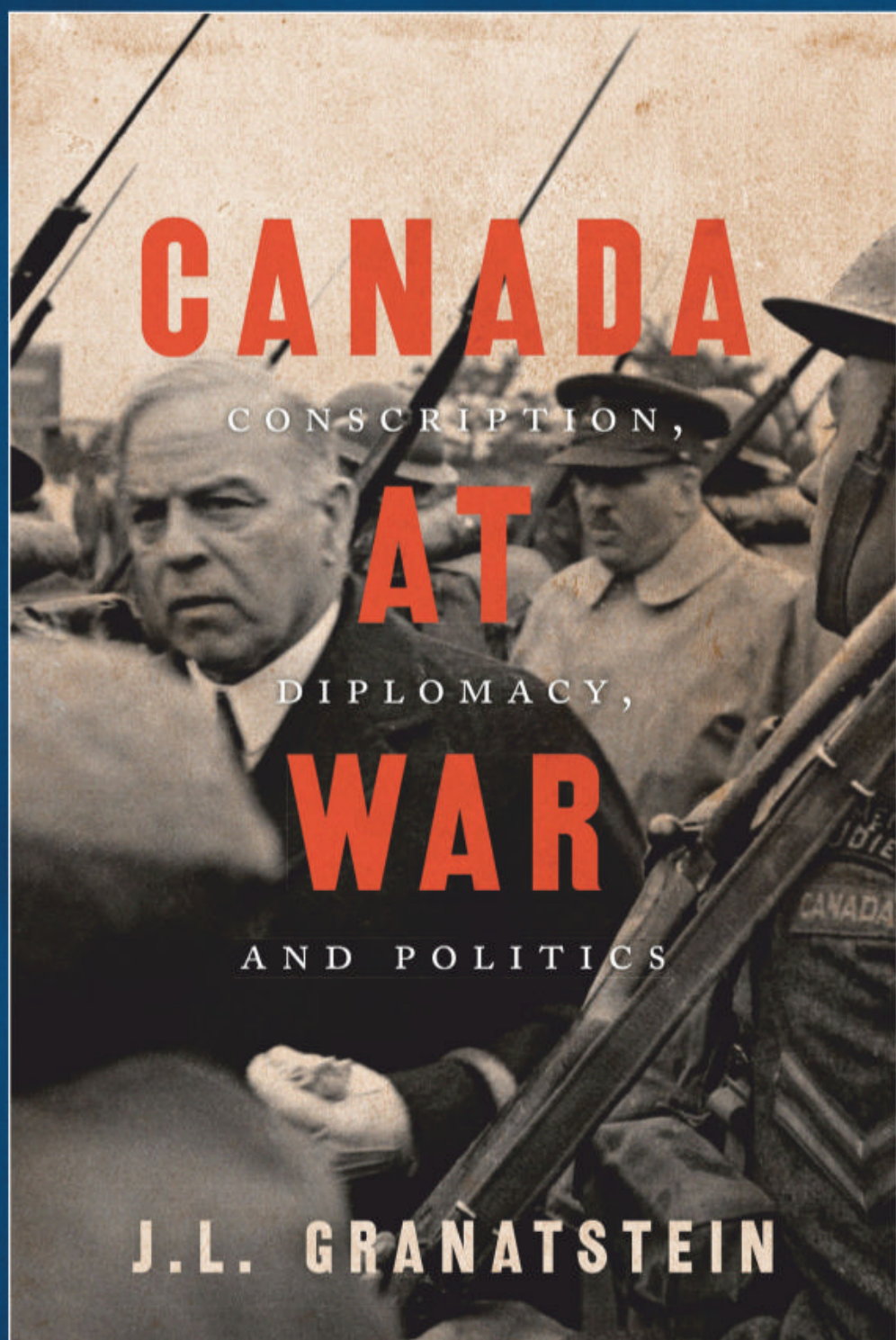
me she had signed a major book deal. It took me the rest of our few days together to process the news that my daughter would be publishing a tell-all about *my* experience and the impact it has had on hers.

On our last night together, we went to see a one-woman show based on Elizabeth Strout's novel *My Name Is Lucy Barton*, starring Laura Linney. It is the story of a mother and daughter who have been estranged for years. It is never clear exactly what has come between Lucy and her mother, but the wounds are deep and intractable. Near the end, there are clues: Lucy is a writer who has left her marriage and her two daughters because she has realized she can't otherwise write the kind of books she wants to, that she "had to be ruthless to be a writer."

Does Lucy regret the path she has chosen? I think, like many of us, she does:

Do I understand that hurt my children feel? I think I do, though they might claim otherwise. But I think I know so well the pain we children clutch to our chests, how it lasts our whole lifetime, with longings so large you can't even weep. We hold it tight, we do, with each seizure of the beating heart: *This is mine, this is mine, this is mine.*

I have not led a blameless life. I own every mistake I have made — every one. I feel my daughters' pain as though it is my own. And I understand the ruthlessness it takes to be a writer. Leah has every right to tell her story. But I will say this as directly and vigorously as I can: *this story, this one, is mine.* ▲



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Looking the consequences in the eye

David Cayley

IT IS STRIKING HOW OFTEN HISTORICAL events arrive with their meanings plainly legible. When Napoleon clattered by Hegel's window in Jena, in October 1806, the philosopher famously perceived in the emperor's appearance "the soul of the world... seated on a horse." The thought that fit the moment was ready for its occasion. In summer 1914, when Europe went to war "like a sleepwalker," as the economic historian Karl Polanyi later recalled, it enacted a fate it was already dreaming. In our time, 9/11 declared its significance almost the instant it happened, as if everyone had just been waiting. With the ruins of the World Trade Center still smoking, the patent meaning of the towers' collapse was easily parsed in the next morning's papers: it was the end of every decadence, the beginning of a new unity, a new discipline, a new age. And so it seems to have been with the pandemic.

Everyone appeared to know right away what COVID-19 meant. Some, like George Monbiot in the *Guardian*, heard "nature's wake-up call to a complacent civilization"; others sensed the advent of a bigger, more caring government; a few even welcomed the chance to test drive a new health-security state, to be better prepared for even worse pandemics in the future. But everyone agreed that the world "had changed forever," that a judgment had been passed on our heedless way of life, and that a new social condition — a "new normal," as so many have said — was dawning.

What has impressed me about the coronavirus is the extent to which its fearsome reputation has eclipsed and occasionally exceeded its actual effects. This is not to deny that some of these effects have been, in places, quite terrible. It is only to point out that the myth of the pandemic — the story that already clothed it upon arrival — has sometimes had more influence on policy than the facts of the matter, which are more difficult to ascertain. Two events seem to have had an outsized influence. The first was the announcement by the director of the World Health Organization on March 11 that the spread of COVID-19 should be considered a pandemic. The word hit with extraordinary force. A *National Post* headline encapsulated the reaction: "PANIC," it simply said, in a font so big and bold that it occupied a good part of the front page. At the time it was written, this headline was not an accurate description of things in Canada. Aside from the play on words — *pan-ic*, *pan-dem-ic* — it can only have been an instruction or permission. From that day on, the virus became the almost exclusive preoccupation of daily newspapers, as if, suddenly, there were nothing else in the world but the contest of it versus civilization.



An event that arrived already clothed in its own mythology.

The second signal event was the publication, on March 16, of a speculative model that had been hastily assembled by the COVID-19 Response Team at Imperial College London. The model tried to predict what might happen in three possible cases: no intervention, moderate intervention, and aggressive intervention. In the first case, the forecast was a disaster: 2.2 million deaths in the United States, more than half a million in the United Kingdom, and so on. The second case was also pretty bad, but the predicted outcome with aggressive action was much better. This model had less foundation than the average weather forecast, since the disease was new, and, at that point, little was definitively known about either its virulence or its communicability. Nevertheless, the predictions quickly carried the day. "I don't think any other scientific endeavor has made such an impression on the world as that rather debatable paper," stated Johan Giesecke, a former chief medical officer in Sweden. Without visible deliberation or consultation, a direction was set: we would fight, as Winston Churchill once said, "on the beaches... in the fields and in the streets," and we would "never surrender." The reference to Churchill is not an idle one: the pandemic seemed instantly to awaken his memory. His defiant attitude and stirring rhetoric in June 1940 would become a touchstone in the weeks and months that followed, remembered and referred to again and again.

Some voices were more cautious. John Ioannidis of the Stanford School of Medicine, a

recognized expert in the fields of epidemiology, population health, and biomedical data science, warned of "a fiasco in the making" if draconian political decisions were taken in the absence of evidence. A number of other equally qualified doctors and medical scientists followed suit. The epidemiologist Knut Wittkowski, formerly at New York's Rockefeller University, recommended that the disease be allowed to spread through the healthy part of the population as rapidly as possible. John Oxford, a virologist at Queen Mary University of London, warned that what we were experiencing was "a media epidemic." In Canada, a former chief public health officer in Manitoba, Joel Kettner, phoned CBC Radio's *Cross Country Checkup* on March 15 to warn against overreaction and to point out that "social distancing" was a largely unproven technique. "We actually do not have that much good evidence," Kettner said. While it might work, he went on, "we really don't know to what degree, and the evidence is pretty weak." Such opinions — contrary to the headline news — were easily available to those who sought them out, but they made little dent in the emerging consensus. Kettner, for example, was treated with strained courtesy by *Cross Country Checkup* host Duncan McCue and then dismissed with little follow-up. The larger narrative had already developed such momentum, and such an impressive gravity, that marginal voices had little effect.

One of the interesting features in all of this was the role the word "science" played. I have yet to hear a statement by either Justin Trudeau

or Doug Ford, the two main political figures for a citizen of Ontario like myself, that fails to emphasize that they are “following science” or, often enough, “the best science,” as if others might be following the inferior kind. Yet when this began, there was little science—good, bad, or indifferent—to actually follow. In place of controlled, comparative studies, we had informed guesswork. No one had seen this virus before, and certainly no scientist had ever studied a situation in which an entire healthy population, minus its essential workers, was quarantined to try to “flatten the curve” or to “protect our health care system.” Such a policy had never been tried.

Behind claims that our political leaders are following science lies a fateful confusion. Does science mean merely the opinions of those with the right credentials, or does it refer to tested knowledge, refined by careful observation and vigorous debate? My impression is that when the premier of Ontario says he is following science, he is referring to the former—the opinions of his expert advisers—but, at the same time, invoking the aura of the latter—verifiable knowledge. The result is the worst of both worlds: we are governed by debatable positions but can make no appeal to science, since the general population has been convinced, in advance, that we are already in its capable hands.

This is a dangerous situation on two counts. First, it disables science. What is best understood as a fallible and sometimes fraught quest for reliable evidence becomes instead a pompous oracle that speaks in a single mighty voice. Second, it cripples policy. Rather than admitting to the judgments they have made, politicians shelter behind the skirts of science. This allows them to appear valiant—they are fearlessly following science—while at the same time absolving them of responsibility for the choices they have actually made or failed to make.

Science, in other words, has become a political myth—a myth quite at odds with the messy, contingent work of actual scientists. What suffers is political judgment. Politicians abdicate their duty to make the rough and ready determinations that are the stuff of politics; citizens are discouraged from thinking for themselves. With science at the helm, the role of the citizen is to stand on the sidelines and cheer, as most have done during the present crisis.

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THE DECISIONS MADE AT THE BEGINNING OF THIS pandemic will have consequences that reverberate far into the future. These will include unprecedented debt, deaths from diseases that have gone undiagnosed and untreated during the COVID-19 mobilization, lost jobs, stalled careers and educations, failed businesses, and the innumerable unknown troubles that have occurred behind the closed doors of the lockdown. Whether these harms outweigh the benefits of flattening the curve is a *moral* question, not a *scientific* one. It would remain a moral question even if the Imperial College wizards had had an infallible crystal ball and could have given us an accurate forecast.

A great part of the panic this past spring was about saving our health care system and not putting overwhelmed doctors into the position where they would have to decide who lived and who died in hospital wards. But did we not quietly make equivalent decisions about others, all the while hiding the fact that we were making

them? If someone loses a business, in which they have invested everything, and then their life falls apart, have they not been sacrificed or triaged, just as surely as the old person who we feared might not get a ventilator? Moral decisions are difficult, but they should at least be faced as moral decisions.

Whenever I have seen the costs of total mobilization compared with the benefits, the costs invariably come out as substantially greater—sometimes by several orders of magnitude. For example, the epidemiologist Jayanta Bhattacharya, of Stanford University, and the economist Mikko Packalen, of Waterloo University, have argued in *The Spectator* that infant mortality will increase dramatically during the economic downturn induced by the shutdown, resulting in as many six million deaths over the next decade. Other studies predict increased deaths from cancer and tuberculosis, as preoccupation with COVID-19 interrupts diagnosis, treatment, and vaccination programs. Yes, these studies are speculative and may rest on questionable assumptions, but in this respect they are just like the many coronavirus models that have induced such fear. They may also involve invidious, fanciful, or impossibly abstract comparisons where one is asked—to take an instance I recently heard—to choose between “saving Granny” and “saving the economy.”

My point is not that a particular model is right or wrong. The variety of plausible scenarios indicates that we are in a condition of ignorance and uncertainty—a condition that should not be hidden by the pretense that science is lighting the way. Nevertheless, such models, as in the case of Bhattacharya and Packalen’s work, can remind us that in saving some, we may have abandoned many others, and that the ones saved will often be those who are already in the best position to protect themselves, while the abandoned will often be the weakest or most vulnerable. Put another way: political deliberation may have stopped—transfixed by the threat of the virus—exactly where it should have started.

Following the early instruction to panic, newspapers excluded all other subjects from their pages for weeks on end—as if it were almost indecent to speak of anything else. CBC Radio, with a few exceptions, followed suit. Soon, the pandemic filled the sky. Extravagant rhetoric became commonplace. One heard that everything had changed, that there had never been anything like this, that there would be no going back. The prime minister, speaking on March 25, called the pandemic “the greatest health care crisis in our history”—an astonishing remark. How can one even compare the flu-like illness that will be suffered by most of the people affected by COVID-19 with the ravages of cholera or the devastating impact of smallpox on Indigenous communities? Yet the prime minister’s hyperbole attracted little comment. It fit seamlessly with all the other excited talk about how “unprecedented” this all was.

The media onslaught had two great effects. The first was to transfer all agency to the virus. Governments took the measures that closed businesses and immured people in their homes—measures that really *were* unprecedented—but these steps were never treated as problematic or debatable, because constant reiteration of the threat posed by the virus made

them seem unquestionably necessary. It was not the government that had turned the world upside down. It was the virus’s doing.

The second great effect was to establish a war psychology. That we were fighting a war, that the virus was a mighty and relentless adversary, that we must win no matter the cost—these all quickly became commonplace ideas. People love war, just as much as they hate it, and a war against an invisible foe, belonging to no race, nation, or class, was ideal. It generated solidarity; it fortified purpose; it empowered heroism; it provoked repentance. How careless we were, we said, before our invisible enemy reminded us of the things that really matter. How brave are the nurses and grocery clerks who serve on the “front lines.” Political careers have been rehabilitated, without the slightest taint of opportunism touching those who were thus revived. The becalmed government of Doug Ford suddenly had the wind back in its sails. The prime minister, hopelessly impaled by contradictions that his sunny ways had failed to overcome, became once again a healer, a generous and resolute friend, a stern father. “Enough is enough,” he reprimanded his wayward children. “Go home and stay home.” Does it sound cynical to say this? Of course it does, even if, by now, the magic has already worn off a little. Who undermines confidence in the government, or questions its motives, during a war?

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QUARANTINE OF THE SICK IS ANCIENT. THE attempt to quarantine an entire healthy population by keeping everyone apart is novel. Has it worked? Some research says yes, some says no. In April, Isaac Ben-Israel, an Israeli scientist, published a study in the *Times of Israel* that suggests COVID-19 infections have followed a remarkably similar pattern in affected countries, no matter what attempts at containment have been made. Ben-Israel, the chairman of the Israeli Space Agency and of its National Council for Research and Development, wrote,

Some may claim that the decline in the number of additional patients every day is a result of the tight lockdown imposed by the government and health authorities. Examining the data of different countries around the world casts a heavy question mark on the above statement.

It turns out that a similar pattern—rapid increase in infections that reaches a peak in the sixth week and declines from the eighth week—is common to all countries in which the disease was discovered, regardless of their response policies.

Ben-Israel’s observations may be impressive, but they don’t account for the resurgence in infections that has since occurred in Israel, the U.S., and other places.

The case of Sweden, a country that tried to steer a middle course, is likewise hard to judge. It took many precautions: shutting down universities and senior secondary schools, closing old-age homes to visitors, encouraging social distancing, and prohibiting large gatherings. But it also kept its borders and businesses open; and its government trusted the good sense of its citizens far more than in other places. Sweden’s per capita mortality has been relatively high—less than the worst-affected countries but still dramatically higher than its more tightly

locked-down neighbours. How are we to interpret these numbers? Sweden is different than its neighbours — more heavily industrialized, with a bigger immigrant population, and larger old-age residences. And the countries that have suffered even worse per capita mortality *did* lock down.

Perhaps those who suffered more at first will suffer less later. If an effective vaccine proves elusive, as many predict, then “flattening the curve” may have meant only postponing the day of reckoning. Variations in the constantly mutating virus, along with differences in ecology, age structure, and genetic makeup, may turn out to be more significant than initially thought. I return to our fundamental ignorance — even the question of whether, and for how long, infection confers future immunity is still under active and disputed consideration. When asked to compare Sweden’s numbers with those of its neighbours, Giesecke, the former chief medical officer, gave an unusually good and truthful response: “Call me next year at this time.”

The fundamental difficulty with assessing the mass quarantine lies in the distinction between correlation and cause. The lockdowns may have little effect on the progress of the disease, as Ben-Israel tried to show, but since they occurred at the same time, they can always be assigned the credit when infections begin to diminish. Controlled study of the question would be fiendishly difficult, if not impossible, and so the whole matter must remain moot. There is no “settled science.” The question then arises: Why were we so quick to adopt such a debatable policy, and why has it been so widely acclaimed?

In many ways, we’ve been practising for this day. Consider the growing emphasis placed on safety. When I was young, people did not urge one another to “be safe,” but now it is a synonym for “see you later.” Many children have entirely lost their independence in the name of safety. Houses and cars have been fortified and securitized. Surveillance has expanded. And every new increment in safety has quickly become mandatory. It’s incredible to recall that the old CBC building on Jarvis Street in Toronto, where I worked for many years, had minimal security and more or less open public access until the late 1980s, when a frightening intruder caused some alarm. Then, in 1992, we moved to the new broadcasting centre, where gates barred the public from work areas, key cards were required for access, and we were asked to display our dog tags at all times (though few did). Immediately the former regime began to seem almost unthinkably unsafe. Good enough had turned into zero tolerance.

Risk consciousness has run on a parallel track. The idea itself is old — traders began sharing the risks of dangerous ventures millennia ago — but it has become more pervasive and more mathematical in our time. Expecting parents, long before they ever meet their child, know the probability of various conditions for which he or she may be at risk. People are regularly checked for diseases they don’t yet have, because they are at risk of getting them. We are, as the health researcher Alan Cassels once joked, pre-diseased. This fosters what might be called a hypothetical cast of thought: a habit of living in the future or acting in advance. It also accustoms people to thinking of themselves in statistical terms rather than as unique individuals. Risks pertain not

to individuals but to a population, a hypothetical entity composed of statistical figments that resemble each other in some way. “My risk,” in other words, does not pertain to me personally — I remain *terra incognita* — but rather to my statistical doppelgänger. When awareness of risk, in this sense, reaches a certain intensity, a habit of thought forms. People are primed for impending risks. It makes sense when we are told that we have to act now, before we know anything for sure, because, if we wait, it will surely be too late.

Risk has another aspect that is relevant to the present moment. In 1986, the German sociologist Ulrich Beck described a “risk society” — a social formation that amounts to an ongoing science experiment with risks we can neither assess nor control. We have no other Earth on which we can conduct a nuclear war and observe the consequences; no spare atmosphere that we can heat up experimentally to see how things turn out. This is a terrifying situation, and it has the consequence of making us extremely risk averse. At the mercy of towering risks that we can barely comprehend, we become all the more zealous in attempting to contain more manageable ones. At least we can try to “wrestle the virus to the ground,” as multiple politicians and editorial boards have put it this year.

Then there is management, and our collective expectation that everything can and should be managed. Fifty years ago, humans first saw images of our planet hanging in space. Very quickly, these awe-inspiring photographs were domesticated, appearing on T-shirts and key chains, fundraising flyers and advertisements. Twenty years later, a *Scientific American* cover featured a stylized version of the Blue Marble and the words “Managing Planet Earth.” By then, the idea had begun to seem almost plausible. Not only were we capable of managing the earth, but we had an obligation to do so in the interests of our survival. A few old souls sensed the astonishing hubris of this claim, but it was soon taken as a given. At the same time, management institutes and faculties grew more and more influential. People got used to the talk of corporate and civic re-engineering and reinvention. This bred another habit of thought: problems must be proactively managed, never simply avoided or endured.

I would note two other factors predisposing us to the supposed scientific consensus. The first is that we have grown accustomed to a state of emergency or exception, as crisis succeeds crisis in our media and our minds. It’s worth remembering that just before the pandemic struck, we were at another extremity: Indigenous protesters were disrupting the national transportation system, and the very legitimacy of Canada as an inclusive political community was being called into question. The second is the sentimentality that has become pervasive in our social and political affairs. By sentimentality, I mean a tendency to pretty things up, to speak and act as if we all felt an almost saintly ardour for the common weal, and to continually dramatize feelings we do not actually have — for example, the “thoughts and prayers” that are transmitted day and night over our airwaves. This tendency has made it easy to turn the pandemic into a morality play, with heroic front-line workers risking their lives to keep the housebound safe from harm. I do not mean to disparage the real dangers some have faced, only to point to the

habit of exaggeration that endows everyone who ventures out in public to do a job with an aura of sanctity. The unctuous, honeyed tones in which the prime minister has addressed the country have been particularly egregious, but many agencies have participated in this agony of solicitude. Hospitals, for example, regularly praise their “champions” who “stop at nothing” in their exercise of “relentless care.” These effusions are a kind of blackmail that sets policy beyond the reach of careful thought by investing it with unimpeachable feeling.

♦

TO COMPLETE MY LITANY OF PRECONDITIONS THAT led to total mobilization against the virus, I will add the halo that has appeared around the word “life.” This amounts to a new religiosity, and perhaps even to a new religion. In *The New Religion of Life in Everyday Speech*, from 1999, the theologian Don Cupitt argued that in daily talk, “life” has assumed all the attributes formerly possessed by God: it is providence, guardian, and guide. Life leads us, teaches us, and has its way with us. It embodies sanctity and inspires devotion. “Life,” Cupitt wrote, signifies “a thing or power or agency that carries us along as a fast-flowing river carries a boat, this way and that; a moving Power that is both immanent within us and (poetically) over against us and surrounding us; that is thought of as not only filling us and inspiring us, but also as having quasi-personal attributes [like] having things in store for us.”

This impalpable power that we so revere has also become an almost palpable entity, which we have an unquestionable duty to foster, protect, and administer. Life has become a topic in law, where one can sue for “wrongful life”; in ecology, which takes life as its subject; in theology, where it is announced as “the highest value”; in business, where every corporation fosters its “human resources”; and in bioethics, where life becomes the object of moral deliberation. All this works to turn life into a definite thing. In the discourses of life, what had been, for secular society, a quality or condition and, for the person of faith, an expression of God’s sustaining will has become a discreet quantum for which “we” feel ourselves responsible.

A ready example is the quantification of life in the news media. Catastrophes are measured by their death toll. Lives “saved” are a gauge of success. “Saving lives,” boasts Toronto’s Sunnybrook Hospital, “one innovation at a time.” These lives are an aggregate, an abstraction. We do not need to know anything about any of them to know that their conservation is an unrestricted good. They are an amount — captured by a new metric, gross national lives. In New York, Andrew Cuomo typified this attitude when he said in March, “I want to be able to say to the people of New York: I did everything we could do. . . . And if everything we do saves just one life, I’ll be happy.” There is an echo here, conscious or not, of the Talmudic teaching that whoever saves a single life saves the whole world. At the very least, the governor’s remark must be understood as a religious statement, since as a political statement it is almost criminally irresponsible. And that is my point.

The most important consequence of this new religion of life, in the present case, is the attitude it engenders toward death. When life is something that we *have*, not as a loan or a gift or a quality, but as a possession we’re duty-bound

to secure, conserve, and extend, death becomes an obscene and meaningless enemy. To think of “the hour of our death”—the ancient formula of the “Ave Maria”—as an occasion we should contemplate and seek out comes to feel defeatist. The old, as I have discovered, are barely permitted to speak about their age without getting a pep talk in return. This makes it difficult to take the losses inflicted by the virus gracefully, even when they are unavoidable. Better to pretend with Cuomo that we will fight to the last ditch. This inability to face death, or to speak frankly about it, makes even the manifest destruction created by the lockdown seem preferable.

The most terrible aspect of the obsession with saving lives, for me, has been the way the old have been left to die alone during these past few months. This is unconditionally wrong. To justify it as an unfortunate, temporary trade-off—or as a necessity in service to the greater good—misses something fundamental. The dying should be accompanied and held, comforted and mourned by those they have loved and who have loved them. No calculus of health and safety should limit this defining obligation: it simply belongs to us as human beings. That safety has supervened over humanity in this way helps illustrate the substitution of *lives* for *persons*. Persons are unique—each will be born and die only once, and the respect due to these two great passages is absolute. There are fates worse than death, and one of them is the bullying of the old into the self-serving belief that we have incarcerated and abandoned them for their own good.



MANY PRECONDITIONS CONVERGED IN A PERFECT storm with the onset of COVID-19. Apocalyptic fear, sanctification of safety, heightened risk awareness, glorification of management, habituation to a state of exception, the religion of life and the fear of death—all came together. And, together, they have made it seem perfectly obvious that total mobilization was the only possible policy. How could any politician have resisted this tide? But recognizing the force of the safety-at-all-costs approach shouldn't prevent us from looking its consequences in the eye.

Mortality will increase from all the other illnesses that have been forced to take a back seat.

Many small and even large businesses will fail, while a few gigantic ones, like Amazon, will prosper even more mightily. Small businesses add colour and conviviality to our neighbourhoods and cannot be replaced by drones and trucks dispatched from distant warehouses. Jobs and opportunities will be lost, predominantly among those who are young and least established, the so-called precariat. Civil liberties will suffer, as they already have. At the beginning of the crisis, for example, the federal government tried, unsuccessfully, to give itself broad powers to spend, tax, and borrow without consulting Parliament. Shortly afterwards, the Alberta legislature passed Bill 10, which authorizes, among other things, the seizure of property, entry into private homes without warrant, and mandatory installation of tracking devices on phones. Authoritarian governments, like Hungary's, have gone much further in consolidating and aggrandizing power under the cover of emergency. Experience shows that all of these new powers, once assumed, will not be readily relinquished. Habits of compliance, developed in the heady days when we were “all in this together,” may prove equally durable.

We are seeing the beginnings of a thoroughgoing virtualization of civic life, not all of which will end with the pandemic. Writing in *The Intercept*, Naomi Klein wittily called this development the Screen New Deal. Among her evidence: the announcement that the former Google CEO Eric Schmidt will chair a blue-ribbon commission charged with “reimagining” New York. The work will focus, Schmidt says, on telehealth, remote learning, broadband, and other “solutions” that “use technology to make things better.” New York has also announced a partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to develop “a smarter education system.” In doing so, Andrew Cuomo called Bill Gates “a visionary,” while asserting that this is “a moment in history where we can actually incorporate and advance [his] ideas.” Do we really need “all these buildings, all these physical classrooms,” the governor asked rhetorically, given “all the technology” now available. And let's not forget that Mark Zuckerberg has been in Washington promoting the saving role of technology in a world where people are afraid to get close to each other.

So this is the heritage: the possibility that the deaths averted by lockdowns will be offset by the deaths caused by them; spectacularly indebted governments whose deficits may threaten basic state functions; increased surveillance; reduced civil liberty; lost jobs and ruined careers; a frightened, more pliable citizenry; and an economy that has shrunk in the worst possible way by casting off the poorest and the weakest—a terrible irony for long-time advocates of degrowth, including me.

Mass quarantines and social distancing measures are easier to begin than to end. Such policies, once undertaken, assume lives of their own and tend to become the reason for their own existence. They generate the fear they ostensibly address: if we weren't in danger, we wouldn't be “sheltering in place” or “keeping two metres apart” or wearing masks or giving restaurants our personal details for potential contact tracing. When this all began, we were told that we must protect our health system from overload and our doctors from agonizing decisions about who should get scarce resources. Even when hospitals were not overtaxed here, I have met people, still under the influence of the initial panic, who believe they were. Nevertheless, the lockdown persisted long past the time when there was any reason to fear that our hospitals would be swamped.

To be sure, an unknown, highly infectious virus does present a serious public health emergency. And yes, we had to do something. But perhaps we responded with an extremely destructive policy; perhaps we responded without waiting to find out what we were dealing with. Our reaction requires a degree of justification that I have not yet seen from those in charge. We've had plenty of Churchillian rhetoric, lots of flattery, cheerleading, and sentimentality, but little that I would call debate over policy. Nonetheless, three elementary points ought to be plainly legible. First, in the absence of a vaccine, we have only postponed our reckoning with this virus. Second, our efforts to temporize rather than improvise in the face of threat have done a huge amount of harm. And, finally, the almost instant willingness to accept that “everything has changed” has opened the door to far worse evils in future. Perhaps we have been afraid of the wrong things. ▲

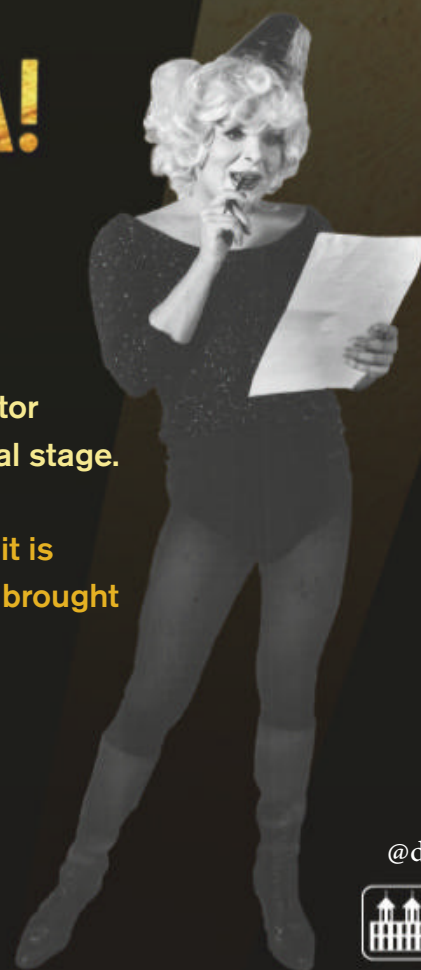


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Howard Steven Friedman
University of California Press
232 pages, hardcover and ebook

Thug: Now, come on — your money or your life.
[long pause]

Thug: Look, bud. I said, “Your money or your life.”

Jack Benny: I’m thinking it over!
— *The Jack Benny Program* (March 28, 1948)

THE RENOWNED MEDICAL HISTORIAN C. E. Rosenberg describes epidemics as dramas that unfold, with remarkable consistency, in three acts. The first features denial, not so much because of a failure of imagination as because epidemics always represent a threat to our interests. Merchants fear for the loss of trade, politicians fear for their electoral prospects, governors for their capacity to manage, and all of us for our customary ways of living. But this first act inevitably ends with reality intruding, as sickness and death penetrate our reluctance to see. The second act, then, is the negotiation of our private and public responses as we reconcile competing values, interests, and ways of seeing to impose some sort of order on the threats. The final act, when containment has been achieved, often ends with a whimper, though evidence suggests we may be permanently changed.

Beyond immediate health concerns, epidemics may simultaneously make visible and upend the assumptions we’ve taken for granted about the world and what’s important. The resulting drama, Rosenberg tells us, serves as a test — a test of the relationships among our “social values, technical understanding, and capacity for collective and private response.” Epidemics test our individual and collective character.

Two recent books by economists, one published in the early days of COVID-19 and the other just before, offer direct and indirect insights into what this current pandemic reveals about us — about how we deal with crisis and how we choose between competing priorities.

Economics in the Age of COVID-19, by the University of Toronto economist Joshua Gans, is the first in what MIT Press envisions as a series on what economics can teach us about the coronavirus pandemic and, presumably, what the pandemic might teach us about economics. In this first contribution, Gans imagines what

the drama of COVID-19 might have looked like if we had simply followed the math and the science. His bottom line is captured in the title of his first chapter: “Health before Wealth.”

Combining aspects of epidemiology and some core principles of economics, Gans makes a convincing case that what needed doing was an immediate lockdown of much of the economy, keeping people and businesses afloat with income-contingent loans, while seeking a vaccine and building a “testing economy” that would guide a carefully targeted and phased reopening. In a pandemic, he explains, the usual trade-offs just don’t work; we can’t simply choose a little more health for a little less



An epidemic in three acts.

economy. Either health trumps economy or we pay a heavy price in both; we must come to this understanding and act quickly, he warns, as delay or drift exponentially increases costs.

This is not simply hindsight. Gans wrote all this at the start of the lockdown — in haste, he acknowledges — so that his insights might be available in time to make a difference. We would undoubtedly be better off if his advice had been consistently followed.

The haste with which Gans wrote does show, especially in later chapters where he considers what lessons should be drawn for the future. He imagines a global approach to pandemic prevention and management that seems somewhat naive, as does his uncritical admiration

of the Bretton Woods institutions, particularly the International Monetary Fund. Gans fails to address what global cooperation might look like in this “America First” moment or to explore the consequences of global cooperation organized around competing poles. And while he recognizes that market incentives will have to be adjusted to get the innovations we need for effective prevention and mitigation, the idea of public enterprise seems to reside outside his window of possibility.

The strength of this book, however, is in its first chapters, where Gans sets out what smart decision making would have looked like in the early months of 2020. But how do we explain the gap between how governments actually behaved — the lack of preparedness, the dithering, the inadequate testing, the premature reopening of the economy — and the economic principles he proffers? The only hint of explanation is his suggestion that most of us just don’t get pandemic math (he actually provides an optional math lesson for those of us bold enough to wade in).

There is something almost quaint and certainly revealing in the implication that if we — individuals or the state — only got the math, we would know how best to pursue our interests and would therefore make the right choices. It’s quaint in that Gans suggests we would all be better off if only economists were freed from the pressures of politics and could just make the decisions for us. It’s revealing in that his version of economics seems to blind him to the questions of who benefits, who pays, who chooses. It’s not just bad math or incomplete information at play when the right-wing pundit Glenn Beck says, “I’d rather die than kill the country.” Or when Dan Patrick, the Republican lieutenant-governor of Texas, says that losing a generation of grandparents (the seventy-year-old himself included, presumably) is a price we should be ready to pay to keep the economy open: “If that’s the exchange, I’m all in,” he told Tucker Carlson in late March. There’s something else, something sinister going on. Just who is being sacrificed here and for whose benefit? Of course, competence, knowledge, and a bit of math matter. But bad math and incompetence alone cannot explain what’s happening in Trump’s America.

What seems to be playing out, rather, is what happens when the economy is treated as something separate from society and culture, when people are valued on the basis of how they contribute to or benefit from it, when we conflate wealth and worth, price and value.

COVID-19 is a combined health, economic, political, and social catastrophe. The virus has preyed on pre-existing inequities

and has revealed and amplified cracks in our systems and institutions. And amid the death and havoc, it has created some big winners. This is Rosenberg's drama of competing interests, conflicting ideologies, and uneven power. But in Gans's version, the social and the political disappear. He gives us a plan to get back to the normal pre-pandemic trade-offs and market mechanisms without considering how that normal might have contributed to both the disaster and our uneven responses to it in the first place.

◆

HOWARD STEVEN FRIEDMAN'S *ULTIMATE PRICE*, written with exquisite timing just before the pandemic, helps to fill in some of what is missing from *Economics in the Age of COVID-19*. Friedman, a statistician and health economist at Columbia University, asks, How do we put a price on human life? What is human life worth, in dollars and cents? He understands that many of us find the idea of pricing human life repugnant, but he warns that it's important to recognize that this is something that happens routinely: for example, when governments determine the costs and benefits of regulations, when courts assess compensation for victims or their families, when insurance companies set premiums and benefits, and when businesses weigh the risks and liabilities of investments. We had best understand how this is done, and why it matters, he tells us, so that it might be done better.

In meticulous detail, Friedman shows that not all lives are valued equally, that social and economic inequalities are often reproduced and compounded in how we calculate the value of any one life. Some measures incorporate factors such as income or expected lifespan, and thus they reproduce gender and racial wage gaps and disadvantage those who engage in unpaid labour and, as always, those who live in poverty. To be valued less is to be protected less. If we must "monetize" human life, he argues, let's do so transparently and fairly.

With *Ultimate Price*, Friedman demonstrates how even measures that purportedly treat all life equally are influenced by ideology and economic interests. Friedman explains how the most basic calculations are fraught with theoretical and methodological — not to mention moral — complexity. For instance, the "value of a statistical life," a measure commonly used in Canada and the United States, sometimes relies on surveys in which people are, in effect, asked how much they would pay for an extra year or so of life. Other approaches use information about risky work, specifically how much employers have to pay to get people to do those jobs. The survey approach is highly subjective, while the supposedly more objective measure assumes that the people who take those risky jobs have a choice, which is often not the case. Such imprecision and uncertainty are fertile soil for politics and power to play out, as competing interests try to influence how life is costed. Some players are simply better equipped and better resourced to get their way. Friedman describes, for example, how corporate lobbyists often push to lower the value attached to life so that in any given cost-benefit analysis, regulatory costs will swamp the benefits.

Some calculation techniques do this work more subtly. For example, discounting, a standard technique for assessing investment options, is often used in cost-benefit analysis.

In investing, it refers to reducing the value of returns the further out in time they are. When used to price life, however, it means giving less value to lives in the future than to those in the present. And that means, in turn, that the benefits of environmental regulations, which play out over the long term for future generations, are routinely devalued.

Friedman draws a vivid picture of how uneven power, competing interests, and social and economic inequality influence how we value life — a picture that can help us understand why we are almost always unprepared for the next crisis, how short-termism is built into our policy processes, and how trade-offs make sense only when we also ask who wins and who loses. At the same time, he doesn't want to throw out cost-benefit analysis altogether. It *can* help, he argues, to make the tough choices.

◆

WITH ALL THE CRISES COMING AT US, HOW DO WE determine those that deserve our attention now? At the end of *Economics in the Age of COVID-19*, Gans makes the cost-benefit case for investments that could help us prevent and manage future pandemics. Assuming a price tag of \$10 million per human life — which he says is the going rate — investing a few billion now is a "no-brainer." As we contemplate such

"How do we determine those crises that deserve our attention now?"

investments, however, Friedman wants us to understand the limits, inequities, and spurious precision of cost-benefit analysis, to put it in perspective, to make it fairer, and to ensure the price we attach to human life is high enough so that the environment gets a fair shot too. But his proposed reforms, as important as they are, don't really get at the larger question of whether putting a price — whatever the figure — on a human life or even on human health might actually do damage. He does not envision a more equal society; he just doesn't want to make things worse.

Both books, taken together, offer important insights about how we think, and about how we ought to respond to this crisis and the next. But they also illustrate how quantifying or monetizing all values can obscure or even diminish what's important — burying in mathematical

equations the debates about values and priorities we ought to be having. Surely, there are some values that trump others, some things that money can't buy. Human rights are not to be traded off, for example, and the environment ought to be protected through some minimum standards not subject to cost-benefit analysis.

Gans and Friedman, each in his way, want us to be savvier about how we count, to be better at calculating costs and rewards, to be equipped for the tough trade-offs we must make as we pursue our self-interest in a world of scarcity and limited possibilities. Of course, that's to the good. But the lens through which they view the world offers only a partial and therefore distorting view of what it is to be a human living in society with other humans.

In this current crisis, we have seen self-dealing but also bursts of solidarity, with some willing to sacrifice others but some ready to sacrifice themselves. We have seen the importance of science but also how power and science can collide, with truth the victim. We have seen how scarcity for the many can coexist with abundance for the few — often with disastrous, even fatal consequences. We have seen that self-interest and the common good may be at odds, and how societies that value cooperation seem, in this moment, to have outperformed those that favour competition.

Some decades ago, I was trained as a sociologist, and perhaps my readings of these two books and these past few months have been influenced by my ongoing disappointment that economics, rather than sociology, has emerged as the mother discipline of the social sciences. Having said that,

it seems clear that the view of humans as profit maximizers or cost-benefit calculators in a world shaped by competition takes us only so far. To understand how we got here and how we might get to a better place, we need to get at the ideas people hold about what's important, how the power to shape the future and even "the truth" is distributed, how much we trust one another, and how able we are to align our actions in pursuit of the common good.

The great sociologist Zygmunt Bauman once lamented that in this age of crisis, when our collective challenges — climate change, nature loss, inequality, insecurity, racial injustice — are so threatening, our collective tool kit is at its weakest. If we are to meet the challenges around the next corner, we will need multiple lenses, multiple disciplines, and a true rebalancing of the individual and the collective. ▲

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Lesson Plans

Adventures in rhyme with a boy of nine

Katherine Ashenburg

WHEN MY OLDER DAUGHTER announced in the spring that I would be “doing English” remotely with my grandchildren every weekday, I thought she was joking. It wasn’t that I minimized her problem: schools had closed in the U.K. at the end of March, and she and her husband had to work from home in a London apartment they share with their three children. Minded by a part-time babysitter, the children had to be kept occupied, reasonably happy and quiet in the close quarters. Then I learned that my ex-husband would be tutoring the nine-year-old boy in physics. He had already set the first problem: How does a cat, thrown out of a window with its feet above its body, always land on its feet? A later tutorial would be devoted to the physics of swinging (as in a playground). How could I compete with that? Obviously, I would have to try.

Robert, my grandson, has seven-year-old twin sisters. For the girls, I would just choose a good book and read a chapter or two every day — a FaceTime story hour. Easy. I asked Robert what he would like to do, and he said he wanted to learn how to write poetry. I wasn’t expecting that.

I reviewed my credentials for this mission. When my daughters were about eleven, I had gone into their class once a week and taught a poem, a John Donne sonnet or a lyric by e. e. cummings. But that was about reading poetry, not writing it. Then I remembered that during a brief stint teaching writing at a high school, I had cribbed shamelessly from a book by the American poet Kenneth Koch called *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry* — an ingenious, freewheeling, and very 1970s compendium of prompts and examples that produced some interesting poems. I found it on my shelves, broken-backed with its pages aged to the colour of weak tea. I was sure that leaning on it and its successor, *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?*, would solve my problem. I emailed Robert a William Carlos Williams poem, “This Is Just to Say,” where he apologizes for stealing someone’s breakfast plums out of the icebox: “Forgive me / they were delicious / so sweet / and so cold.” Robert’s assignment was to draft an apology of his own, in which the speaker was not completely contrite.

Although the resulting poem was fine, the poet was not happy. He didn’t know the term “free verse,” but he didn’t want to write it: he wanted to rhyme. I wasn’t expecting that, either. True to his era, Koch thought rhyme and meter would confine kids’ imaginations, and his examples were all free verse. But Robert is a bit of a numbers guy, and the puzzle involved in

fitting a story or an idea into a particular rhyme scheme and beat appealed to him. Plus, “I like the sound.”

Back to the drawing board, beginning with a poem by Marianne Moore, “The Wood-Weasel,” as a model. The assignment was to write about an animal that no one liked, roughly following Moore’s rhyme scheme and meter. Robert seemed to like her poem, but his own never surfaced. Maybe Robert Herrick’s praise of untidiness, “Delight in Disorder,” would succeed where Moore had failed. Herrick’s erotic hints of “wantonness” in clothes would escape my grandson, but the assignment — write about something messy that you enjoy — might appeal to him. I explained the seventeenth-century terms, since to a nine-year-old in 2020, a “petticoat” is as unfamiliar as a “crimson stomacher.” But no poem resulted.

Finally, I found a kindred spirit for Robert: the nineteenth-century nonsense poet Edward Lear. Imitating the rhyme, meter, and mocking spirit of “How Pleasant to Know Mr. Lear,” he produced a portrait of a lazy, bad-tempered old woman: “Her eyes are as big as tea saucers, / Her nose as long as two sticks, / Her brown teeth in need of some flossers, / And her tongue gives the wettest of licks.”

I’m not claiming that Robert has precocious lyrical gifts, just that it’s been diverting and challenging trying to marry his liking for rhyme to the right subject and sensibility. Once he was familiar with iambic meter, the most commonly used in English poetry, where an accented syllable follows an unaccented one (“my love is like a red, red rose”), the math guy wanted to learn more obscure rhythms. Not having travelled to the wilder shores of meter since graduate school, I put together a simplified guide. I did worry that I would have to dissuade him from trying to write a poem entirely in anapests (two unaccented beats followed by an accented one), but luckily he knows his limits. More important, watching him play around with rhythm has reminded me how important music is in verse.

Robert prefers to compose without pencil or paper or computer, just talking it out. He’s a throwback to the oral tradition that way. And that put me in mind of Scots ballads, so we read the tragic stories of “Lord Randall” (death by poisoning) and “Bonny George Campbell” (“Saddled and bridled / And gallant rode he, / but he never returned”). In Robert’s hands, the ballads’ weight of laconic sorrow took on a youthful insouciance. In his homage to “Bonny George Campbell,” titled “Torquil of Cowstock,” a young boy goes missing: “They looked and they looked, / but find him they couldn’t. / And maybe poor Torquil / would find home or wouldn’t.”


Don’t be deceived by this light touch: poor Torquil’s fate involves wolves, ghouls, and rotting flesh. Before we ended our lessons, when the school term closed at the end of July, Robert had written a Jabberwocky-style adventure poem and some clerihews (short, satirical poems rhyming the names of famous persons), but none have lived up to Lear. Yet this boy, adept at FaceTime, split screens, and googling, has the soul of a comic Victorian poet. Lear’s “The Owl and the Pussycat,” with its internal rhymes, inspired “The Blue Baboon”:

The blue baboon sat by the water,
Eating a hazelnut.
He had fur a bright blue, that had a
deep hue,
And also a great big butt.

The palm trees swayed in the heat
of the day,
And the buffoon just carried on;
Walking and talking, while the parrots
were squawking,
Playing an accordion.

As we approached our final lesson, I felt somewhat guilty that I had abandoned *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams*, and I tried again to introduce a note of modernity into Robert’s repertoire. One of Koch’s simplest and most successful ideas was to ask children to write a poem in which each line begins with “I wish,” and I suggested that Robert use that as a model. He duly turned in a poem in which every line began that way, but he had written four-line stanzas that rhymed ABCB in a mostly iambic meter with a light sprinkling of anapests. There was no stopping the incorrigible rhymester.

One of his wishes was that “the weekend was always nigh,” to rhyme with “fly.” I asked, “How do you even know that word?” The answer was matter-of-fact: “It’s in ‘Away in a Manger.’” Of course — I should have known that. Why had he diverted from the free verse in Koch’s example? “If I have a choice, I’ll rhyme.” In case I was missing the point about the deficiencies of free verse, he picked up a random book from his shelf, read a few lines of prose, and said sarcastically, “There. That’s a poem.”

I said I was pretty sure that in a few years he would discover some poems in free verse that were as skillful, original, and wonderful as any that had rhyme and meter. He looked skeptical but theoretically willing to be proved wrong — just not any time soon. We probably won’t resume our tutorials when Robert returns to school this fall, but I have ordered *The Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear* for his birthday. 

Migrations

Meanwhile, down below

Sarah Wylie Krotz

IN EARLY MAY, THOUSANDS OF SANDHILL cranes, oblivious to the lockdown that had been under way for about six weeks, flew over Edmonton en route to their northern breeding grounds. Their muted calls were reminiscent of waxwings, for which I scanned the nearby trees before realizing that the sound came from thousands of feet up in the air. As we joined our neighbours in the street to watch, the migratory Vs dissolved as the large birds paused their forward momentum to circle and drift in the thermal drafts. Far below them on the surface of the earth, we worried about illness and collapsing economies; to these birds, who have plied these skies for ten million years, the day no doubt felt quite different. Just seeing them and hearing their quivering cries was, for a few moments, liberating.

Given the isolation and anxiety caused by COVID-19, birdwatching has gained popularity in recent months. So has reading poetry. Like birds, poetry is part of our habitat. We inhabit language and literature as much as we inhabit architecture, streetscapes, and weather patterns. Words contribute to the noise of our daily lives, just as sandhill cranes and garbage trucks do, and, like our walls and gardens, they form structures that bind us to some species and separate us from others. Words entangle us with our environments. Poetry, a particular form of wordcraft, is nothing less than an acute noticing of language and experience. Like birdwatching, it requires attunement and attention. Indeed, the two activities are not dissimilar. Both put us in a state of meditative awareness, bringing the possibility of surprise, even transcendence.

Despite the ubiquity of birds and poems, both are perceived as somewhat eccentric pursuits, the activities of quirky enthusiasts. This may be because their pleasures are not always immediate or fully satisfying: poetry, like birding, can occasion boredom and frustration. They humble us by rewarding hours of quiet, patient, labouring attention with only a fluttering glimpse, a flash of life that can be but partially grasped. Birdwatchers and poetry lovers alike relinquish control — over time, over certainty, and over established ways of knowing themselves and their worlds. And as those worlds have grown smaller of late, birds and poetry — and especially the poetry of birds — remind us to look upward and outward, beyond ourselves and our confined, socially distanced lives. They expand our habitat even as we remain in one place.

◆

MY OWN LITERARY HABITAT HAS LONG INCLUDED the poetry of Mary Oliver, who died in January 2019 at the age of eighty-three. Lately, amid the strain of living with the looming horrors of climate change, a pandemic, and an overdue

reckoning with the societal illness of racism, I have returned to Oliver for reminders that humans are also living through the changing seasons, with those everyday miracles of opening buds and migrating birds. These things go on — for now at least — and can help us as we struggle to make sense of our world, our histories, and our futures. My ecological habitat also includes, along with migrating cranes, the geese that are the subject of what may be Oliver's most famous poem — one that helps me understand the appeal of noticing birds amid the pressures of human life.

Far from alienating or elevated verse, the scant eighteen lines of "Wild Geese," first published



Birds and poetry are part of our habitat.

in 1986, are the kind that bind people in a common sense of things. It is a warm hug of a poem that soothes despair by replacing a religious vision with an ecological one. "You do not have to be good," the speaker tells us in the first line. "You do not have to walk on your knees/for a hundred miles through the desert repenting./You only have to let the soft animal of your body/love what it loves."

The poem is a mantra for belonging. As generous as it is simple, it is capacious enough to encompass a range of perspectives and personal histories, including the poet's own path as a lesbian who left the American Midwest for New York in the 1950s. Many can find a home in these lines:

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will
tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles
of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the
clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your
imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh
and exciting —
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

What Oliver offers us is a beautifully concrete articulation of ecological thinking that weaves words and worlds in an expansive poetics of habitat. In them are pathways not just for living, but for *living with*: for finding one's "place/in the family of things."

This place begins with the "soft animal of your body." Summoning us to inhabit our own physical natures, Oliver establishes an intimacy between humans and other living beings. What makes this ecological image so poignant is that it is not a metaphor: *we are* animals, our bodies the soft flesh of the world: living, breathing, feeding, mating; vulnerable and impressionable; loving and dying. This soft fleshiness is also our primary habitat: our bodies are the original and, ultimately, the only things that we inhabit, the porous form through which we live and love.

Poets teach us about both of these things, and Oliver reassures us by letting our animalness direct our actions. It is nearly effortless: "You *only* have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves." That is all you have to do. And you don't even have to actively *do* it, you just have to *let* yourself do it.

As a birdwatcher, I am happiest when half effaced — when the outline of my body seems to blur just a little, dissolving into warm air, a brief shower of rain, and birdsong. This is a form of intimacy. In Oliver's loving ecological vision, this intimacy extends from the softness of bodies to the bond between the speaker and the reader: "Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine." The beautiful symmetry of this line — with three metrical feet balanced on either side of the delayed "yours," held by commas, like cupped hands, at its centre — gives "your" despair a place equal to, while separate from, "mine." This gesture reminds us about empathy and community, as well as the distinct yet shared pain of living.

The poem's deepest consolation emerges from what may be its most important term, although it is unassuming: "meanwhile." Used three times, this languid word — deceptively plain — gestures to countless parallel goings-on, drawing our attention out of despair and loneliness to the world beyond. This world is not specifically emplaced; it could be almost anywhere. After the intimate habitat of our bodies, "Wild Geese" expands outward to a planetary dwelling that encompasses a myriad of unspecified "landscapes" defined by sun, rain, prairies, trees, mountains, rivers.

Pointing to the simultaneity of lives, of happenings, of perspectives and experiences, despairing and otherwise, "meanwhile" is a word that pulls us gently out of our own self-centredness. It relieves our despair by diminishing it in the face of a world that "goes on," whether we despair or not. "Meanwhile" prompts what the philosopher Timothy Morton calls "the ecological thought," which suggests the endless proliferation of other existences that decentre our own, even as we recognize our place in the mesh of living things. That small, abstract word re-entangles us — soft, mortal animals that we are — in what the ecofeminist Donna Haraway describes as our "thick copresence" with the world: with sun, rain, prairie, tree, and river; and with the wild geese who head home, doing their own soft animal things.

The beautiful tension in "Wild Geese" comes from the way that Oliver simultaneously nurtures individual and communal perspectives. The final lines speak directly to us: "the world," we read, "offers itself to *your* imagination," announces "*your* place" — unique and contained — "in the family of things." The poem thus encircles us in the world, puts us in its embrace. Yet at the same time, the echoing instances of "meanwhile" ensure that our perspective cannot be the only one. There are others, marked most explicitly by the geese on their way to their own uniquely perceived world.

Humans are also not the only agents in this poem. It is not the poet, after all, but the *world* that calls to us "like the wild geese, harsh and exciting." Far from being a passive landscape laid out for our aesthetic enjoyment and imaginative exploration, this world is a powerful, even "harsh" force that "announces" our place — one might even say it *puts us in our place*. Our place in the family of things is just that: *one* place — nothing more, and nothing less. For every despair, there is another. For every lonely human, there are scores of meanwhiles keeping us company, whether we notice them or not.



"WILD GESE" PROMPTS US TO NOTICE, TO DO what the literary scholar Laurie Ricou argues we should do more often: that is, "to listen to what the world outside of (human) language systems might be saying." What does it mean to "listen" in this way? Where does such listening take our imaginations? Like cranes, wild geese are noisy as they migrate from their winter homes to their summer ones and back again. To listen to them is to wonder at their unique existence and perceptions that make up one of the many layers of the place we inhabit, even as it remains in some fundamental sense unknown to us. The Canada geese whose honking cries can be heard from my home every spring and fall are remarkable, adaptable birds. They can live up to thirty years, mating for life. Although some take up perma-

nent residence in warm parts of North America, most migrate twice a year, flying up to 5,000 kilometres in those distinctive V-formations. Their calls announce the changing of the seasons, but also, as Oliver suggests, the planetary scale of the home that we all share.

In this home, we are connected in ways we might not initially recognize. In "Wild Geese," the making of art explicitly relies upon the presence of birds. The poem's wisdom does not reside solely in the human speaker: Oliver's words meet and mingle with "the clear pebbles of the rain" and the "harsh" calls of the geese and, indeed, of the "world" itself. The poem thus becomes an expression not just of ecological thinking, which entangles us in the mesh of life, but of an ecology of words that is quite literally *shaped* by the birds that fly overhead, beyond the confines of the poem. Life itself — finding one's homely place — depends upon other voices.

The world, like Oliver's cacophonous geese, teaches us things all the time. The Potawatomi biologist and poet Robin Wall Kimmerer, who describes "the generosity of geese" in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, tells of meeting a Gwich'in man from Alaska who described himself as "a boy who was raised by a river." It was "a description as smooth and slippery as a river rock," she writes. "Did it mean only that he grew up near its banks? Or was the river responsible for rearing him, for teaching him the things he needed to live?" Or could it be something in between? "I suppose both meanings are true — you can hardly have one without the other."

It is said that an aspen tree in France taught the Victorian critic John Ruskin the rules of drawing, guiding his weary arm with its form. Closer to home, a catbird supplied the words for John Glassco's poem by the same name. Reading it is another exercise in listening beyond human language, and meditating on the relationship between us and the birds who speak: "eh villia villia 'vrehu, eh villia 'vrehu eh velù villiu villiu villiu! / 'tse dàigh dàigh dàigh / tse-de-jay 'tse-de-jay 'tsee-'tsee 'tsirritse-'tsirritse."

Glassco's catbirds and Oliver's wild geese help shape our thinking by urging us to notice the different realities that converge with our own. The "world" that "goes on" in "Wild Geese" is not one thing but many. Meanwhile, the rains fall and the wild geese fly home. Meanwhile, as I sit at my desk, the magpies natter in the blue spruce outside my window and the earthworms, unheard by me, dig their quiet tunnels down below. Meanwhile, somewhere out on the northern tundra, the sandhill cranes that flew over Edmonton have reared their young, who will join them on their return.

"Meanwhile" is the best lesson of birdwatching. The pleasure of observing a thousand migrating cranes — as we will soon be able to do once again, if only we take the time — is both the pleasure of feeling ourselves on the earth in relation to these beings of the sky, and the pleas-

gone birds

flinch at infinity / count hearts / wingbeats /
 tiny beaks vanishing. recoil at such mind-
 numbing stats, but once you notice, void
 feathers show up everywhere. i've seen
 their pale prophecies, begging us to
 believe. no mysteries. no baby-teeth
 lining the tooth-fairy ossuary, no
 tiny incisor per silent red song-
 bird. tally time. tick-tock / tic of
 habit / habitat / reeds from wild
 wetlands woven into suburbs
 of schlock / savannah's grass
 ground into conglomerate
 profits / gold-dust in lost
 wings / trivial as pocket-
 lint. can't hear the cost?
 it smashes into glass.
 shattered beaks lip
 our leaden vault of
 amnesia. i flap-flap
 around, panicked
 by the sounds of
 a dying sky; but
 a fix's missed —
 & we lack the
 mechanics
 of flight.
 earth's a
 sonnet;
 an ode
 that
 has
 no
 "I."

kerry rawlinson

*kerry rawlinson writes poetry and flash fiction when not
 roaming around the Okanagan Valley barefoot.*

ure of imagining what it's like to be up there. We are not alone when we recognize the more-than-human communities with which we share this planet. In the midst of the largest pandemic in a hundred years, in the midst of protests and riots, economic collapse, social and environmental devastation wrought by climate change, and the narcissistic pathologies of the Anthropocene, this realization, like Oliver's poem, is a gift. It is hard not to despair in the face of the wrenching challenges of being human. Birds remind us to heed other voices, to let ourselves love what we love, and to do so humbly: not owning the planet, but inhabiting our place in it. ▲

Inspirations

Dream Work

Mary Oliver

Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986

Shifting Gears

Toward a car-free future

Chad Kohalyk

Do Androids Dream of Electric Cars? Public Transit in the Age of Google, Uber, and Elon Musk

James Wilt

Between the Lines

293 pages, softcover and ebook

AMID THE PANDEMIC, WE CANNOT help but reflect and imagine how to make our future lives better. What timing, then, for James Wilt to publish a book on an underlying problem that has dogged us for over a century. In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Cars?* he positions transportation as the centrepiece in our collective fight “against the forces of inequality and oppression” that are epitomized by the automobile. Indeed, how we get around is intrinsically “linked to many other issues including housing, food, and access to healthcare, education, and social services.” And without proper transportation for all — whether urban, suburban, or rural — any “improvements in those sectors can’t be fully accessed.”

For Wilt, we can win this “war for streets and communities” through public transit, which he frames in absolutist terms: “Public transportation must be funded as oppositional to automobility.” On one side of the fight are transit riders and workers; well-funded tech firms like Tesla, Uber, and Waymo are on the other. The decisive battle will be over the will of political leaders: Is it possible to convince them that novel tech solutions are mere stopgaps? That we need to invest instead in a long-term vision of public transit? In other words, can and will leaders prioritize the needs of citizens today and tomorrow, rather than the profits of corporations?

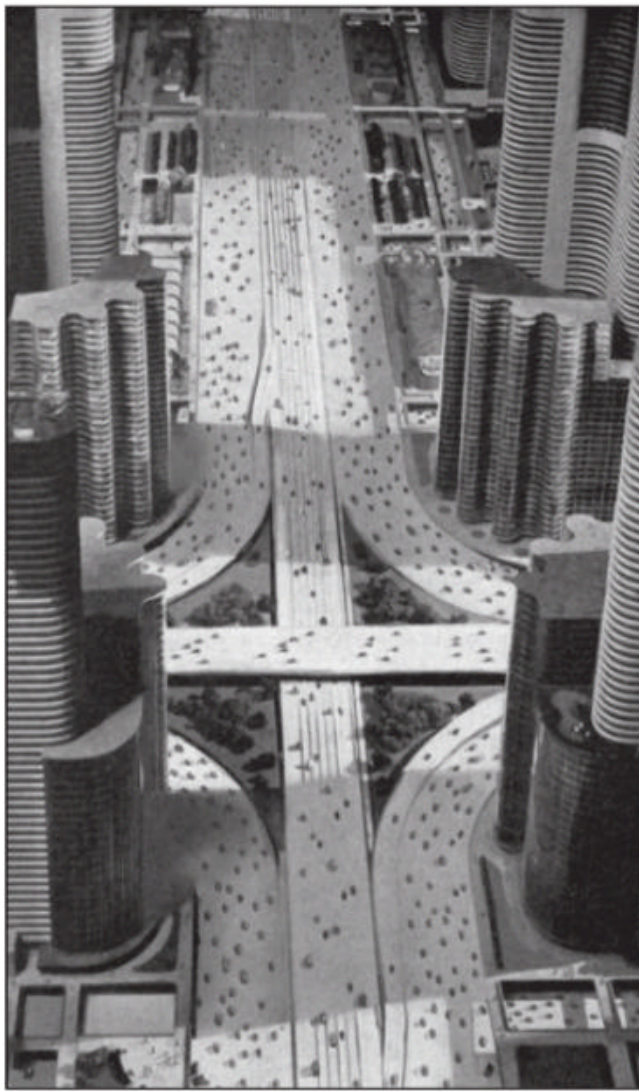
The weapons brandished by the tech firms in this campaign are the so-called three revolutions: electric vehicles, ride hailing, and autonomous vehicles. Silicon Valley touts these as ways to decrease car ownership, fight climate change, and increase transportation access for elderly and disabled people and other disadvantaged groups. Wilt considers each revolution in several thematic chapters (on inequality and poverty, on congestion and safety, on rural and inter-city travel, and so forth), and then compares and contrasts their efficacy with public transit’s. Needless to say, batteries, apps, and machine learning simply aren’t revolutionary enough.

That is not to say this is some sort of public-transit puff piece. Wilt questions existing transit systems and highlights many of their faults. He argues that fares do not impede transit usage, as some contend, but “overwhelmingly poor service” does — particularly in smaller communities. And that fault can be overcome only

by prioritizing public transit (especially as fare-dependent systems like New York’s MTA and Toronto’s TTC have seen ridership bottom out in recent months).

To realize the full potential of public transportation, society needs to overcome two cultural hurdles: the centrality of the automobile and the popular perception that venture-backed technologies can solve all of our problems.

North America clearly has a deep-seated bias toward individual car ownership — a powerful proclamation of our independent, atomistic ways. In his 1973 book, *The Private Future: Causes and Consequences of Community Collapse in the West*, the British architecture critic Martin



Behold our atomistic ways.

Pawley called the automobile “the shibboleth of privatization; the symbol and the actuality of withdrawal from the community.”

Wilt relates the history and development of systemic car supremacy, beginning with the first U.S. federal roads program in 1916 (only eight years after the first Model T came off the line). The role of public transit systems — which really started to coalesce in the early nineteenth century — suffered alongside the car’s ascendancy and declined even further with the rise of neo-liberal policies in the 1970s. Such policies generally took the form of deregulation, privatization, and public-private partnerships. These approaches have increased public transit costs (development, maintenance, and fares) and

decreased quality. It’s a vicious cycle cloaked in the trappings of fiscal responsibility: a lack of public funding makes the service worse and often more expensive, which makes fewer and fewer people want to pay for it, which justifies more cuts and reinforces the centrality of cars. But, Wilt argues, making transit “fare free” — without the “inconvenient and humiliating means-testing processes” of discounted fares for some — can dramatically increase ridership, as we’ve seen in nearly 100 communities across Europe and North America, including Missoula, Chapel Hill, Victoria, and Kansas City, Missouri.

“Solutionism” is another cultural impediment to sound transportation policy. The Ned Ludds of the world notwithstanding, we have a tendency to think that tech can solve just about anything. Especially for political leaders — who need to appear to be doing something, and now! — technology solutions become convenient substitutes for substantive policy making.

♦
WILT, A FREELANCE JOURNALIST IN WINNIPEG, HAS put together a well-written text that’s packed with data and practical examples. He has drawn from a staggering number of articles and conducted dozens of interviews himself. However, the book begs for an overall theoretical framework. Early on, for instance, Wilt mentions the concept of “mobility justice,” but he does not exactly integrate it into his own findings.

We need some sort of guiding framework, because we know, in this post-fact world of ours, how unconvincing mere data can be. Wilt’s cynical reader might retort that people are too enamoured of individualism and convenience to be swayed by stark, rational arguments for good society and sustainability. And while this book may not convince the skeptics, it could help radicalize those curious about transportation activism and serve as a useful repository for transit wonks and academics. Sympathetic readers might want to create riders’ unions, team up with organized labour, or embark on door-knocking campaigns, for example, and Wilt arms them with useful context for starting those conversations. Still, this is not a comprehensive manual for reform. It leaves out many details about how transit systems and funding work on the local level — which is probably appropriate considering the wide differences across provinces, states, and municipalities.

Wilt also skims over car sharing, particularly of the cooperative variety. That’s somewhat surprising since the Peg City Car Co-op, in his hometown, is a Canadian leader. As an example of how private companies cannot be depended upon for transportation needs, he does mention Car2Go. The German company began operating in the United States in 2010 and in Canada the

following year. A decade later, in early 2020, it ceased all operations in North America while citing a “volatile” market — a move that affected 800,000 customers. But there’s much more to the car-sharing story than headline-grabbing corporate players.

Unlike for-profit car-sharing outfits, driven by scale and returns on investment, co-ops can respond to the interests of their members, a feature that Wilt considers a key to effective transportation planning. Consider Modo, which has served British Columbia since 1997. Individuals and small companies alike use the co-op’s vehicles for personal and business purposes. In fall 2019, Modo surveyed its members about allowing drivers to use its cars for ride hailing, too: 66 percent of respondents said the practice should not be allowed, out of concern that too much of the fleet would be pressed into for-profit service. And that would be a “misalignment” with the co-op’s “core social purpose.”

Studies have shown that ride-hailing apps like Lyft and Uber actually contribute to congestion, but research also shows that a single car-share vehicle can take between nine and thirteen other vehicles off the road. When my family of four left Vancouver for a car-centric community in the B.C. Interior, a car-share co-op let us stay car free. And because many co-ops have linked their services, I could “roam” in other communities, taking advantage of other collectives while on business or holiday. More of this bottom-up, member-first networking should be encouraged.

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ULTIMATELY, WILT IS A RADICAL, NOT A REFORMER: he wants to get rid of personal cars outright and everywhere. Because *Do Androids Dream of Electric Cars?* is primarily about funding public transit, he doesn’t go into the specifics of a car ban, but outlawing those vehicles is clearly his ultimate mission.

Wilt’s shorter-term goal is to show that public transit can be more accountable to the needs of people. Democratic oversight would allow us to steer our transportation providers away from pure profit and toward meaningful action on climate change and other social issues. Rather than taking a piecemeal approach to organizing disparate private actors, we can culturally reposition public transit — and not Elon Musk’s latest gadget — as *the* holistic solution. As Wilt puts it:

The strengthening of public transportation can be combined with many other social movements: communities struggling for housing rights, minimum wage increases, unionized and dignified work, abolition of policing and incarceration, better healthcare, and improved community safety and resiliency.

Transit, of course, is so much more than getting from A to B. The history of twentieth- and (so far) twenty-first-century transportation policy is one of destruction of wetlands and neighbourhoods, racial segregation, gentrification, exacerbating inequality, food deserts, air pollution, and millions of accidental deaths and injuries. Reimagining how we move around is fundamental to addressing many of society’s ailments — ailments that we cannot expect an Uber or Waymo to solve for us. James Wilt’s book provides a timely service. Now we have to take the next step and plot our route to a more just and sustainable society. ▲

POLITICKING

A Noble Departure

The lost art of standing down

Scott Griffin

IT SEEMS THAT CANADIANS NO LONGER SEE value in the honourable resignation. That’s surprising since so many of our political and civic customs have emanated from the Westminster model, which, traditionally, has attached great importance to the act of resignation. It is one thing for a politician or prominent person, whether in the public or the private sector, to apologize for making a mistake; however, if no consequences follow that apology, the act of contrition rings hollow. Under these conditions, forgiveness is seldom forthcoming. The perpetrator is left exposed — weak and hoping the offending incident will simply disappear. It rarely does.

An honourable resignation need not be the death knell to a political career; in fact, it has the ability to wipe the slate clean and allow for a resounding comeback. British politics is rife with examples where the most blatant scandal has laid waste to a minister’s career but that politician later returns and exceeds all expectations. Think of Harold Macmillan and the Profumo affair, Anthony Eden and the Suez crisis, or, most famous of all, Winston Churchill and the disastrous Gallipoli campaign. More recently, we’ve seen the resignations of Alan Duncan, Margot James, and Philip Hammond over Brexit. All of these people knew that a mistake on their watch, or other matter of principle, called for an immediate resignation. They understood that it would be unacceptable to put personal privilege above the greater civic good. Clinging to power — as one’s peers chant “For God’s sake, go!” — would simply be dishonourable.

Canadian politicians, by contrast, seem intent on avoiding resignation at all costs. If they can somehow weather the storm, they believe, they’ll come out further ahead. They fail to recognize that by digging in, they lose credibility and almost certainly undermine their future prospects. And should crisis happen more than once, it wipes out any likelihood of a long-term career. It is, in fact, the kiss of death. Yet again and again we witness Canadian politicians apologizing, explaining, even grovelling with excuses — anything to avoid the decent and strategically intelligent moves of admitting to a mistake, apologizing, and resigning.

We all make mistakes, and many of us are taught at an early age that we learn more from our mistakes than from our successes. But if there are no consequences for our mistakes, we learn nothing. Refusing to take responsibility and own the proper consequences allows one to adopt a sense of entitlement, to believe that errors are pardonable when you occupy a high office. To believe one is immune to the consequences is to invite repeat offences. Far too often in Canadian politics, resignation is viewed as a weakness, the

ultimate failure, an admission that all is lost, a reputation in tatters — a permanent hell.

Are some calls for resignation more legitimate than others? Of course. Being caught with one’s hand in the till is beyond any excuse. To be ensnared in a conflict of interest that entails personal gain should be an automatic case for resignation. In Britain, one will face calls for resignation if caught lying in Parliament. That’s hardly the case here. Mistakes that arise on a minister’s watch but with which the minister had no direct involvement — admittedly, that falls into a grey area where much depends on the seriousness of the case. Was the minister lax? Should the minister have known what was going on? Sexual peccadilloes garner much attention and titillation, but while the revelations are inevitably embarrassing for the parties involved, there may not be a need to resign unless there are questions of national security at stake. When in doubt, however, it is better to resign and live with the comment “Well, at least they did the honourable thing.”

The ramifications for the body politic, let alone the nation, of not resigning can be a corrosive waste of time and energy, prolonging unnecessarily the failure to resolve issues and ultimately leading to a denigration of the country’s traditions, even laws. Devoid of decent behaviour, all activity becomes a focus on money, power, and votes, all subject to gross manipulation. To see such a result, one need only look south of the border, where politics and civility are too often swept aside by money and power in their crudest forms.

Leadership in any enterprise, and especially in politics, requires the highest set of principles reinforced by example. Leaders who operate technically within the rules but who employ clever machinations dilute the spirit of the law and diminish a nation’s ability to promote collective decency. As citizens, we should expect and demand proper behaviour from our representatives; it’s in our collective interest to do so. And knowing when to resign should be part of that behaviour.

We ought to insist that politicians who commit mistakes admit their failures, apologize, and resign. And for those decent and competent persons who *do* resign — or those who are forced out by superiors under the cover of resignation — we should accept and even welcome their return to office after a suitable period of redemption, recognizing they are now ready to contribute to the common good as wiser and more experienced public figures. This would be infinitely more healthy for Canada than standing by and watching a politician issue yet another feigned apology and then insist that his or her remaining in office is for the good of the country. ▲

Life of the Parties

A political history

Ron Hikel

**Partisan Odysseys:
Canada's Political Parties**

Nelson Wiseman

University of Toronto Press

240 pages, hardcover, softcover, and ebook

NOT SO LONG AGO, PARTIES WERE the dominant engines of the political process in many democracies. They identified, recruited, trained, and nominated suitable candidates, then helped finance and organize campaigns for public office. This process was brilliantly analyzed decades ago by the French scholar Maurice Duverger, who described parties as “transmission belts.” More recently, after the 2008 Democratic primaries in the United States, four American political scientists summarized this traditional approach in *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations before and after Reform*. But today the transmission belts of many democracies seem to have worn out. What has happened?

A complex process of societal transformations has brought fundamental changes that have weakened party institutions. These have included upheavals in the news media, specifically the decline of print journalism and local newspapers, and the increasing domination of cable news channels that are heavily devoted to partisan views. Whether online or on television, more and more people now consume only the news sources that confirm their existing views. And, paradoxically, the declining influence of “backroom boys” and the more prominent role of the rank and file in candidate selection (a change introduced in the name of a more democratic process) may have intensified the influence of celebrity culture and divisive personalities. The nomination and election of Donald Trump, in 2016, is the most obvious but by no means the only or even the most recent example of this effect.

Into this environment comes *Partisan Odysseys: Canada's Political Parties*, by the well-known and respected political scientist Nelson Wiseman, of the University of Toronto. His book summarizes the emergence, successes, failures, and fates of almost two dozen political parties from the early nineteenth century to today, while illustrating their dynamic interactions with a “society permanently under construction.”

Partisan Odysseys is comparatively short but quite dense; it is intended, so the author writes, as a primer for non-specialists and general readers. Even so, it refers in synoptic fashion to countless political and social moments over the past two centuries — from pre-Confederation party formation to the Great Depression

and today. How parties have responded to these events, and how their responses have in turn influenced the evolution of Canada, is Wiseman's central theme. No doubt, this book will send some readers to their local library for more details on crucial episodes referenced only briefly here.

Across ten chapters, Wiseman describes the dominant ideas, concerns, and issues that parties have had to face from era to era, often in quite different ways. Consider Canada's entry into the Second World War, which had a profound effect on the political landscape:

The war had built faith in the wisdom of government; centralized planning had proven efficacious, and government came to be seen as having more responsibility for the public's health and welfare, for alleviating illiteracy, malnourishment, and homelessness. Canadians had accepted an expanded role for the state during the war and expected it to continue.

Among the book's many pleasures are numerous conclusions about national governance that are not generally accepted or well known — including the fact that Canada has spawned almost twenty parties, most of which have come and gone. Yet two of the earliest to arrive, the Liberals and the Conservatives, remain dominant. And despite their apparent stability, each has, for at least short periods, come quite close to extinction.

The book also reminds us just how many minority governments Canada has had: more than a third of federal elections have produced them. Between 1957 and 1965, for instance, there were five national elections, four of which resulted in minorities. Two of three elections in the 1970s gave us minorities; and, of course, we have one now after having had three in the 2000s. These minority governments occur despite the widely held assumption that our first-past-the-post system, with its single-member constituencies, is the most likely to yield stable majorities. (And it's worth remembering how few coalition governments Canada has produced.)

Typically, party brand and party leaders influence voter behaviour more than local candidates do, and then there's what Wiseman calls the social determinants of voting: religion, education, region, language, and economic class, each of which can push voters in various directions. Wiseman suggests some of these factors have weakened recently, and this weakening actually contributes to the volatility of the electorate. Indeed, the average Canadian voter is now more “changeable” than the average American

voter. This “exceptional electoral volatility” is especially present in Quebec, a development that Wiseman partially attributes to younger voters who may be more likely to identify with ethnicity than with a policy position on the ideological spectrum.

The 2016 U.S. election helps illustrate the comparative changeability of Canadian voters. That year, 97 percent of incumbents contesting seats in the House of Representatives were re-elected. By contrast, Wiseman shows, “the turnover of MPs in Canada has averaged more than 40 percent in the twentieth century.”

Canadians are also less likely than Americans to have “party affiliations ingrained into their personal identities.” Our neighbours to the south actually go to the polls much more frequently than we do and have more occasions for their partisan sentiments to be mobilized: “Since many of their ballots are pages long, many voters just vote the party ticket, which voting machines allow.” Because Canadians are more flexible, we see a greater openness to supporting “upstart third parties” (a tendency facilitated, in part, by our parliamentary system).

One of the more entertaining aspects of the evolution of political parties in Canada is the extent to which they, sooner or later, adopt positions they once strongly opposed. Historically, for example, the Liberals favoured close ties with the U.S., while the Conservatives argued to maintain our imperial link with the United Kingdom. But in 1988, the Conservative prime minister Brian Mulroney argued for free trade with the U.S., while the Liberals, who had supported it in the elections of 1891 and 1911, were now led by John Turner and against it. Of course, Mulroney got his way, with NAFTA. Then there is the welfare state, which the Conservatives began to describe as a “sacred trust” in the 1980s, after having opposed the introduction and subsequent expansion of what Mulroney once called “the tragic process of Swedenizing Canada.” But then, as the leader on the campaign trail, he “rejected means tests — investigating people's financial circumstances to determine whether they are eligible for a social program — and claimed such programs were ‘a cornerstone of our party's philosophy.’”

Those who know or know of Nelson Wiseman will not be disappointed by this work. If there is a revised edition, some readers would likely welcome the inclusion of tables that list the dates of federal elections and their outcomes; the names and dates of prime ministers; and the names, dates, leaders, and present status of all the parties mentioned in the book. The history and present impact of Canada's parties remain of great importance, even if they no longer drive the political process the way they once did. ▲

Thank You, Next

The Conservatives' commitment problem

Joe Martin

THIS ESSAY WAS BEGUN IN ANGER, LAST November, when I began encountering people who called themselves Conservatives but who were saying the most awful things about the party's leader, Andrew Scheer, after he failed to win the October 2019 election. Nearly a year later, I am no longer angry. I am resigned to the fact that Conservatives tend to eat those leaders who don't give instant gratification. I have also come to appreciate how uncommon the Canadian model of leadership selection is, and how it could be improved so that the macabre feast ends.

The attacks I heard on Scheer were from those frustrated with defeat. The fact that the member of Parliament for Regina-Qu'Appelle had increased the number of Conservative seats and had won the popular vote was not enough for these people, who might benefit from a short history lesson. What was different in 2019 than, say, in 1980, when Joe Clark lost government, was the fact that there were as many within the party who defended Clark as there were who attacked him — whereas in Scheer's case, one heard almost no defence.

Consequently, Scheer announced his resignation on December 12, rather than face a leadership review. Presumably those who called for blood assumed there would be a long list of star candidates — all better than the former Speaker of the House of Commons, the youngest ever — to replace him. A convention date was set for June, but it had to be postponed to August because of the pandemic. As a result, the Tories had only a lame-duck leader during the past parliamentary session, when the Liberals needed to be held to account on a whole range of issues, not the least being responsible government.

I'm not attempting to defend Scheer or the quality of his judgment. But suffice it to say, he had one great advantage over those who sought to replace him: the experience of defeat. In life, one learns far more from failure than from success. That's true of most of us. If only parties were willing to hold on to their battle-scarred leaders, they could share in those lessons.

The attacks upon Scheer were part of a long-term tendency among Conservatives to turn on their leaders. Back in 1980, the political scientist George Perlin called this tendency the "Tory syndrome," in a book of the same name. Perlin noted the party's poor electoral record following the introduction of conventions and argued that "persistent internal conflict which has focused on or involved the party's leaders" contributed to poor performances. Bob Coates, a Diefenbaker loyalist and long-time MP from Cumberland-Colchester, also observed this tendency, describing it as the "wanton destruction of... leaders in times of adversity."



A long line of leaders meeting their fate.

THE TORY SYNDROME IS ALMOST AS OLD AS THE Tories themselves. In 1891, Sir John A. Macdonald led his Conservatives to their sixth electoral victory in seven tries, but he died shortly thereafter. He had four successors in the next five years. His third was Senator Mackenzie Bowell, who served as prime minister from December 1894 to April 1896. In January 1896, seven cabinet ministers, led by George Foster, suddenly resigned. Bowell referred to Foster's group as the "nest of traitors," and when the traitors quickly returned to cabinet — "like sheep into the fold" — they forced Bowell's resignation as both party leader and prime minister. The next federal election was just fifty-seven days later; Wilfrid Laurier's Liberals would form government, even though they lost the popular vote.

When Robert Borden stepped down as prime minister in 1920, the cabinet favoured Sir Thomas White, recently the minister of finance, as his successor, but the caucus preferred Arthur Meighen, because of his oratorical skills in the House of Commons. In the 1925 election, Meighen led the party to the most seats — fifteen more than the Liberals' — and the highest percentage of the popular vote, and it was assumed by all that Meighen would become prime minister. But this was not to be, as Mackenzie King's Liberals managed to form a minority government with Robert Forke's Progressives. When Meighen briefly did become prime minister, in 1926, his government was defeated on a "broken pair," a breach of an

informal arrangement among MPs of opposing parties.

In the 1926 election, Meighen had to contend with Howard "Boss" Ferguson, the Conservative premier of Ontario and a former friend. When Ferguson turned on Meighen, the federal party lost fifteen seats in Ontario, enough to give the Liberals power once more. Ferguson's hostility spilled over into the 1927 convention — the first one the party held. The most dramatic moment came when Meighen gave his farewell address. The delegates loved the speech, but Ferguson went into paroxysms of anger on the platform — a visible symptom of the Tory syndrome.

R. B. Bennett won that inaugural leadership convention, and he went on to run a brilliant electoral campaign in 1930, securing the first Conservative majority since 1911. The bad news was that the country was entering the third year of the Great Depression, which hit Canada harder than any other industrialized country and was compounded by the Smoot-Hawley tariffs imposed by the United States. All things considered, the economy had started to turn around by 1934; the Bennett government had managed the crisis as well as could be expected. But that fall, one of Bennett's key cabinet ministers, H. H. Stevens, the minister of trade and commerce, not only resigned from cabinet but also established his own Reconstruction Party. The presence of Stevens's offshoot in the 1935 election resulted in a rout, the Conservatives' worst until 1993. While the Reconstruction Party won only one seat, it won 8 percent of the popular vote,

depriving the Conservatives of many seats they otherwise would have won.

Arthur Meighen and R. B. Bennett were men of substance with appropriate gravitas. Their successors were worthy men, but they lacked the stature of Meighen and Bennett. The deposing of Bennett, especially, shows the consequences of rashly turning on a leader when times are tough.

In 1942, having tried out two or three leaders and having lost another general election, the party called a convention. With five minutes to go, John Bracken, the Liberal Progressive premier of Manitoba, arrived with his signed papers. There were four other candidates, including, of all people, H. H. Stevens, who had done so much to bring the Tories low in 1935. Bracken won on the second ballot, and the party accepted his unfortunate demand to change its name to the Progressive Conservative Party (the fourth change in five years).

Bracken steered the party to sixty-seven seats in the 1945 election, up from thirty-nine in 1940, and helped restore the Progressive Conservatives in Ontario. Even still, he was pushed out by the old guard, specifically by George McCullagh, publisher of the *Globe and Mail*. (Bracken once said that he would rather do a hard week's work on the farm than have a ten-minute telephone conversation with the Toronto bagman.) At the 1948 convention, George Drew, the pre-

mier of Ontario, easily won the nomination on the first ballot, beating, among others, John Diefenbaker, who was running for the second time. What were the results in the next election? Drew managed to double the Conservative seat total in Quebec — from one to two. He was less successful in his own province, where the party lost nearly half of its seats and ended up with only twenty-five, its worst showing in Ontario since 1896. Nationally, it was the third-worst defeat in party history.

A convention was scheduled for late 1956 to replace Drew. The outcome was determined decisively on the first ballot: Diefenbaker won 774 of the 1,284 votes cast, or just over 60 percent. Diefenbaker was neither a "renegade in power" (to use Peter Newman's phrase) nor a "rogue Tory" (as Denis Smith would have it). He was a reforming Conservative in the spirit of Sir John A. Like Macdonald, who inherited an insular party that had been captured by the Family Compact of Sir Allan MacNab and took it mainstream, Diefenbaker broadened what had become a closed-door party of Toronto and Ontario to include all of Canada — including women, those who spoke neither French nor English, and First Nations people.

In 1957, Dief led the party to its first victory in twenty-seven years. And in 1958, the Conservatives won the greatest percentage of

House seats — 78.5 percent — of *any* government. Even in Quebec, Dief won fifty seats, the most since 1882. Indeed, there was far more Diefenbakermania in 1958 than there was Trudeaumania ten years later. But in 1962, the party lost nearly 100 seats as the Laurentian Coalition turned on Diefenbaker. Dief held the Liberals to minority status in the next two elections largely thanks to the Western redoubt he had established and maintained.

In 1966, the distinguished lawyer and parliamentarian Arthur Maloney vied with the journalist and political strategist Dalton Camp to become president of the Conservative Party. "When the Right Honourable John George Diefenbaker enters a room," Maloney said, "Arthur Maloney stands up." But after a close vote, Camp won and introduced the policy of leadership reviews after electoral defeats. The result was a bloody beheading that profoundly changed Canadian politics.

At the 1967 leadership convention, Camp and the members of the Big Blue Machine were successful in electing Robert Stanfield, the premier of Nova Scotia. Dief, who had won three federal elections in a row, was humiliated, running fifth on the first ballot. Even George Hees, who did not hold office at the time, placed above him. In his final remarks, where he endorsed Stanfield, Dief pleaded, "Don't, as the fires of controversy rage around your leader, add gasoline to the flames."

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THE MAIN PURPOSE OF CHANGING LEADERS IS SO that a party will do better in the next election. So what happened in 1968, after Diefenbaker's beheading, is rather ironic: the Conservatives lost twenty-five seats, their worst showing in fifteen years. In Ontario, they had by far their worst result yet. Back in Prince Albert, Dief described the day as "a calamitous disaster."

At the 1976 Progressive Conservative leadership convention, Joe Clark placed third on the first ballot, in a field of eleven. On the fourth ballot, he went up the middle and won to succeed Stanfield. Clark formed a minority government in 1979 — the only person ever to defeat Pierre Trudeau — but lost the following year.

While Clark and Brian Mulroney seemed to get along, their supporters did not. And when Clark lost in 1980, there were cries to replace him. Veterans of the hard days contend that the subsequent leadership review contributed to bad feelings without ensuring a sound process. Another convention was held in 1983, with a field of candidates that included both Clark and Mulroney. This time Clark was first on the first ballot but slipped to second on the fourth. Mulroney became leader.

Brian Mulroney led the Conservatives to two successive majority governments, the best showing of any Conservative since Macdonald. This contributed to an overall positive feeling, so much so that in 1986 a dinner was held in honour of Sean O'Sullivan, the former Hamilton-Wentworth MP who had gone on to become a priest. "The room was full of Tories who were celebrating something rare in the party: forgiveness," O'Sullivan wrote. "A lasting peace was declared." Of course, it is a lot easier to forgive and keep the peace when you're winning majority governments.

One of Mulroney's great contributions to Parliament was how he kept the caucus involved even when his party was down in the

Ceremony of the Salmon Run

The upstream pressure to secure new life
lingers in us who wallow in the shallows

who drive up from the sea into this vein
of earth and split hard ground with desire.

The spring was open and summer closed
now we are separate from shoals and schools

and the individual does not seem heard
against the flood of screams and promises.

Over terrain we have covered before
blindly then as now but then much younger

thinking this was the purpose of the world
this driving energy to conquer. Flourish

of moments in a shallow streambed of gravel
and curious clarity of surfaces sheening

in the dull sun against the fatherly trees
before the gates of stone into a thin darkness

we will break through and never return.
We break open and are festering in the sun.

George Moore

George Moore is the author of the collections Children's Drawings of the Universe and Saint Agnes Outside the Walls.

polls. But in the early '90s, the government and the prime minister became increasingly unpopular, and Mulroney stepped down. Not surprisingly, fewer candidates threw their hat into the ring at the 1993 leadership convention than at the 1983 convention (five compared with eight). Kim Campbell, the minister of justice, won on the second ballot but went down to ignominious defeat in the general election later that year. The party was reduced to two seats in a 295-seat House. Lucien Bouchard, who had bolted from the party, led the Bloc Québécois to official opposition status, and Preston Manning's Reform Party captured the Diefenbaker redoubt. The combination of Bouchard and Manning made Harry Stevens's defection in 1935 look like small potatoes and once again helped bake the Tory syndrome into the party's DNA.

Following Campbell's defeat, vicious internal struggles seemed to shift from the decimated Tories to the Liberals. While the supporters of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin battled each other, the Conservatives were busy just surviving.

In 2003, at the last convention of the Progressive Conservatives, Peter MacKay won on the condition that he would not merge with the Canadian Alliance Party (successor to Manning's Reform Party). But that same year, after a dismal decade of electoral results, the Alliance and the Progressive Conservative Party finally came together to create the modern Conservative Party of Canada. The following year, there was a leadership convention, which Stephen Harper easily won on the first ballot.

Beginning in 2004, Harper led the party through five elections, winning not only minority governments but a majority in 2011. In 2015, the Conservatives lost, and Harper stepped down as leader. A leadership convention was held in 2017, with more than a dozen candidates. And on the thirteenth ballot, Andrew Scheer won, as he narrowly defeated Maxime Bernier. Rather than staying with the team, Bernier followed in the footsteps of Stevens: he left and formed his own People's Party. While Stevens wreaked greater havoc on the Conservatives than Bernier did, just imagine what a difference the nearly 300,000 votes that went to the People's Party would have made in the 2019 election — especially in Quebec.

Despite all of the noise that followed the election, it's important to remember that Scheer led the Conservative Party to the largest percentage of the total vote in 2019 and an increase in seats. He gained seats in Ontario, and though he lost a few in Quebec, he still won more than most Conservative leaders have (and he might not have lost any had Bernier not defected). And once again, the Western redoubt remained firmly in place.

Those who attacked Scheer — so bitterly that he chose not to face a formal review — must have assumed that someone better would appear. Yet the final field of candidates was small, and none of the "dream candidates" bothered to enter the race. It would seem the Tory syndrome is just as bad for potential leaders as it is for denounced ones.

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RIGHT BEFORE DIEFENBAKER WON SUCCESSIVE elections in 1957 and 1958, Pete Seeger wrote

"Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" A circular song that summarizes the cost of war, it begins:

Where have all the flowers gone,
long time passing?
Where have all the flowers gone,
long time ago?
Where have all the flowers gone?
Young girls have picked them every one
When will they ever learn?
When will they ever learn?

More and more, this song brings to mind the Canadian Conservative tradition. As Seeger lamented about humanity's tendency to self-destruct, "When will they ever learn?"

While there were real policy differences between Boss Ferguson and Arthur Meighen, most leadership changes over the past 125 years have been driven by more superficial and myopic considerations. In that sense, the Tory syndrome is this country's political equivalent of the Maple Leafs phenomenon: the fans in the loyal base are so desperate for a winning season that they continue to fire coach after coach without looking inward. Considering decades of disappointment, it is time for the Conservatives to truly shake things up — not to develop more policy positions, although that too is needed, but to try a different method of choosing a leader.

When Robert Stanfield was leader of the Progressive Conservatives, from 1967 to 1976, he

"The Tory syndrome is the political equivalent of the Maple Leafs phenomenon."

asked me to review the operations of the Office of the Leader of the Opposition. In doing so, we also looked to the United Kingdom, where Ted Heath was leader of the opposition at the time. We learned a great deal then that's even more relevant now.

Tories in Canada would do themselves a favour if they had another look at the U.K.'s Conservative Party. Yes, Disraeli complained about the "greasy pole" of British politics. But since 1895, the third Marquess of Salisbury and his successors, right up to Boris Johnson, have had more security in office than Conservatives here. They've also been far more accountable to caucus than our party leaders.

The lack of accountability here stems in part from the legacy of the 1919 Liberal leadership convention, which grafted an American-style, general membership convention onto our parliamentary system. It wasn't a natural fit. Mackenzie King informed his caucus that he was answerable not to them but to a convention — which did not reconvene for twenty years. The Conservatives followed the Liberals' example seven years later. As the historian Christopher Moore has argued, the result has been a century of political leaders who are largely unaccountable to either convention or caucus.

Both parties have accepted, at the federal and provincial levels, that neither the caucus nor the general membership has any power over the leader once that leader is chosen — unless an election is lost. Perhaps there's a reason our

hybrid method of choosing leaders has not caught on anywhere else, not in Australia nor Ireland nor New Zealand nor the U.K.

Historically, in Westminster, the caucus chooses its leader, because that leader needs to have the backing of the bulk of MPs. More recently, the Conservative caucus narrowed the field down to two candidates — Jeremy Hunt and Boris Johnson — for consideration by party members, who made the final decision one month later. That timeline limited the number of "instant" Tories who could sign up. This latest British method answers the call for ordinary members to have a say, while leaving the leader accountable to his or her caucus, which is in turn accountable to the people.

And in the process of looking at how a leader is chosen, some attention should also be paid to restoring a level of civility and respect. The Conservative Party of Canada must learn to throw water on the flames of controversy surrounding a leader, rather than gasoline. Otherwise, it risks another twenty-year drought, just like the one that followed the ouster of Bennett.

It's time to reject the Mackenzie King and U.S. model in favour of one that's more along the philosophical lines proposed by Michael Chong in his Reform Act, which he first introduced in late 2013. A backgrounder for the act reads:

The proposals in the *Reform Act* would reinforce the principle of responsible government. . . . Since Confederation, numerous and gradual changes have eroded the power of the Member of Parliament and centralized it in the party leaders' offices. As a result, the ability of Members of Parliament to carry out their function has been curtailed by party leadership structures. The *Reform Act* proposes to address this problem by restoring power to elected Members of Parliament.

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ON AUGUST 23, AFTER A SHORT TECHNICAL DELAY with the count, Erin O'Toole was chosen as the new leader of the Conservative Party of Canada, after finishing fourth in 2017. As the sitting MP for the Ontario riding of Durham, he has the distinction of being the first Conservative leader from Canada's most populous province since George Drew stepped down over sixty years ago.

I'd encourage O'Toole to pay heed to some advice that Sir John Thompson, our fourth prime minister, received in the 1890s. A friend of his wrote to explain that when travelling by dogsled, you always hang the harnesses up at night so the dogs don't chew them up. The difficulty for the Conservative Party in the late nineteenth century was that the sled dogs had got at the harnesses. The difficulty continues today. Erin O'Toole's true challenge will be to keep the harnesses hung up at night — to find a cure for the Tory syndrome — while returning some power to the democratically elected representatives he now leads.

A Whole Different Animal

Transforming our food systems

Jennifer O'Connor

Green Meat? Sustaining Eaters, Animals, and the Planet

Edited by Ryan M. Katz-Rosene and Sarah J. Martin

McGill-Queen's University Press
256 pages, hardcover and ebook

IN A MARK OF WHOLESOME MEAT, A SHORT 1964 film produced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, we watch how millions of animals — cattle, sheep, pigs — journey from farms and ranches to slaughterhouses and onward to lunch boxes, dinner plates, and picnic baskets. Carcasses are rolled into a cooler. Bags of powder are mixed with ground meat (all according to regulation, the unseen narrator assures us). A vendor in a paper hat tosses out wrapped hot dogs at a baseball game. We learn that continued economic growth depends on health, and prepared and processed meat contributes to our well-being. Indeed, meat is “enjoyed by almost everyone, everywhere, every day.”

Since the film was made, global per capita consumption of meat has doubled, which has raised a host of ethical, economical, and ecological issues. A new collection, *Green Meat?*, examines these issues, while considering what is “green,” even what is “meat.” But mostly this book is concerned with the question mark: Does “green meat” mean less meat? Does “green meat” mean redefining meat altogether? Does “green meat” mean a post-industrial food system? What even is “green meat”?

The editors, Ryan M. Katz-Rosene, of the University of Ottawa, and Sarah J. Martin, of Memorial University, take the position that “there is no singular definition of green meat.” Rather, the sustainability of consuming animal proteins depends on a much larger context, on “people thinking about the social, health, and environmental implications of all their dietary choices — not just those of one or two food groups.” That said, Katz-Rosene and Martin define three pathways to “green meat”: modernizing meat, replacing meat, and restoring meat.

The first pathway relies on new technologies and intensification of production to improve agricultural efficiency. This includes innovations that “reduce the use of water, land, and other inputs, or which recycle previously discarded materials.” For example, “bio-digesters” can capture the methane released from manure “and use this to generate energy.” Animals themselves can become more productive through “advanced hormones and targeted antibiotics” and genetic interventions “to induce multiple births.” Farmers might also do more to “sequence genomes to select for more productive and healthier

animals.” In many ways, such technologies simply further existing mechanisms of our industrial system and put additional pressure on the soil.

Similarly, “replacing meat” often includes industrial processes necessary for synthetically produced meat, plant-based proteins, and insect farming. These alternative sources of protein, the theory goes, require less water and land to produce, and so will better meet the nutritional needs (and consumer preferences) of a growing population. However, these options raise concerns about industrial crop production that demands abundant herbicides, pesticides, and irrigation; about diminishing biodiversity; and about not-yet-determined externalities



The science and husbandry of “green.”

associated with lab meat, which is grown from “animal-derived stem cells” but is not “harvested from a living animal.”

Finally, “restoring meat” means recognizing the roles that animals play in self-sustaining farm ecosystems. If managed in an agro-ecological way, livestock can actually help restore the grasslands that constitute about 40 percent of the planet’s land surface, by reducing soil erosion and improving soil fertility while reducing biodiversity loss, unnecessary water withdrawals, and air and water pollution. Even so, livestock is still meat, and traditional husbandry is not as efficient as industrial agriculture.

In addition to the editors’ introduction, ten essays explore various pathways to green meat.

In “Confronting Meatification,” for instance, Tony Weis, of Western University, speaks to the economic, environmental, and health issues associated with the “industrial grain-oilseed-livestock complex.” These include decreased soil health due to monocropping (one-third of crops grown are used for animal feed), methane emissions from wastewater lagoons, and the risk of infectious diseases caused by *E. coli*, listeria, and other pathogens. Weis argues that “meatification,” or the centring of meat in our diets, both reflects and exacerbates inequality; and that food security depends on reducing the production and consumption of meat within industrial agri-food systems.

In “The Promise and Peril of ‘Cultured Meat,’” Lenore Newman, of the University of the Fraser Valley, provides an overview of cellular agriculture: “the production of agricultural products from cell cultures.” Consider that one type of plant-based burger contains leghemoglobin, which is produced through the fermentation of beans, to mimic the “bloody, umami” flavour myoglobin gives meat. “With such excellent plant-based substitutes,” Newman writes, “the question has been asked why we need *in vitro* meat at all.” And in “The Evidence for Holistic Planned Grazing,” Sheldon Frith, a consultant with the Northern Farm Training Institute, in the Northwest Territories, argues that “holistic planned grazing” practices can improve levels of organic carbon in the soil, as well as water retention and biodiversity. As properly managed cattle, sheep, and goats move across pasture land, they deposit fertilizer, which they work into the soil with their hooves, aerating the top layer of ground. If pigs and chickens follow, they can spread the manure and manage insects. Holistic management goes beyond grazing, however, to integrate “all aspects of planning for social, economic, and environmental considerations.”

Elsewhere, Gwendolyn Blue, of the University of Calgary, describes “a feminist multi-species approach” in which the personal is political as well as epistemological. As such, it would acknowledge interactions among humans and non-human species and consider “geographical, cultural, and historical contexts.” It might include changing farming practices to deter — rather than kill — predators, or could involve the restoration of bison herds. It is an approach, she admits, that “does not lend itself to tidy, elegant slogans such as ‘eat less (or no) meat to save the climate.’” In another essay, the University of Manitoba’s Shirley Thompson, Pepper Pritty, and Keshab Thapa explore historic land use in the “foodshed” of Garden Hill First Nation and how the “eco-carnivore” diet enjoyed there is sustainable and reflective of traditional values and culture.

Katz-Rosene and Martin conclude that “green meat” means eating less meat, “particularly within industrialized economies.” Western diets will need to replace more animal-based proteins with non-animal proteins. And a shift is needed to a post-industrial food system that’s “located in community and ecologically grounded production systems.” Ultimately, achieving green meat will require the guidance of NGOs, governments, the market, and “self-governance” within the industry and among consumers. For one thing, truly sustainable meat will mean “that *all* the edible parts of the animal are eaten, not just the ones that are popular.” North Americans’ preference for chicken breasts, steaks, and ribs “poses significant hurdles for both producers of livestock and processors of meat to overcome in order to find ways to use the whole carcass.” We all have to make some different choices. (So far, I personally have enjoyed bison tongue at Au Pied de Cochon, in Montreal, and roasted marrow at Chez Piggy, in Kingston.)

♦

IN *FOOD JUSTICE*, FROM 2010, ROBERT GOTTLIEB and Anupama Joshi define a sustainable food movement as one that “seeks to ensure that the benefits and risks of where, what and how food is grown, produced, transported, distributed, accessed and eaten are shared fairly.” For them, justice means a wholesale “transformation of the current food system, including but not limited to eliminating disparities and inequities.” The essays in *Green Meat?* engage with these issues, which are all the more relevant in 2020.

The pandemic has shown the vulnerability of workers and the risks of corporate concentration. A single plant in Alberta, which was linked to one of the largest outbreaks in Canada, has the capacity to process more than one-third of this country’s beef. It and other facilities that supply beef, chicken, and pork were shut down as workers tested positive (many complained that physical distancing rules were ignored). Moreover, according to the Census of Agriculture, the number of Canadian farms is 193,492, a decrease of almost 6 percent since 2011, as small operations are consolidated into big ones. While this was actually the lowest rate of decline over the past twenty years, the number has been steadily decreasing since at least 1961, when there were 480,900 farms. More land (93.4 million acres, an

almost 7 percent increase) is being used for crops, and this can mostly be attributed to changing land use — converting pasture to cropland, for example.

We’ve also seen a greater corporate concentration of ag: the number of farms with more than \$1 million in revenue increased by 36 percent between 2010 and 2016. As the Council of Canadians has suggested, we have larger farms, heavier chemical use, and weaker prices. Our farms are producing more chickens and pigs, but despite a decrease in overall head of cattle, beef farms remain the second most common type. (Perhaps there are silver linings: the census also showed that the number of farm operators under thirty-five went up for the first time since 1991, and one in eight farms is now selling directly to consumers — everything from fruits, vegetables, and eggs to value-added products like wine and cheese.)

Almost 13 percent of Canadians are food insecure, which means they worry about running out of food, scrimp on quality or quantity, or actually go days without. (There are incredible disparities here: for example, a recent study by the charity FoodShare and the University of Toronto revealed that Black households are almost twice as likely as white households to face food insecurity.) And while Canada finally has a national food policy — meant to address such things as food waste, domestic food production, and food security, especially in northern and remote communities — organizations such as Food Secure Canada and others who advocated for it have been raising concerns about its implementation, even before COVID-19 made the injustices of our food system so clear.

All this is to say that a lot more than per capita meat consumption has changed since *A Mark of Wholesome Meat* showed what it took to get the USDA’s “stamp of approval.” Today, industrial agriculture is about so much more than an endless supply of meat patties and cured ham. Like Katz-Rosene, Martin, and their contributors, we all need to ask tough questions about our meat — and everything else on our plates. ▲

After Labour Day

Osprey kingfisher and I.
Drizzle flattens the wakening lake.
Summer cottagers flown to home

how free we are here. Loon call.
Echo. Across the lake three of them
idle in shallows, two adults

a young one, wakes spilling silver.
Summer has quit the air, but the lake
holds some of it yet. I slip

into warmer. Ripples alongside
play my skin with musician
fingers. Muscles humming

I ease past my neighbour’s dock
the next and on and on. Turning

I face rising wind. Distances lengthen.
My toes hoard cold. I remember
the snapper, triangle head above water

my strokes suddenly affrettando —
could I kick with his jaw fixed
to my foot? On shore I towel blood

into my limbs. My elderly cat
stalks the smoke-bush. A song sparrow
whirrs from the feathery pink.

Jean Van Loon


Jean Van Loon holds an MFA from the University of British Columbia and is the author of Building on River.

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A Farewell to Arms

Where did all the junk go?

J. L. Granatstein

War Junk: Munitions Disposal and Postwar Reconstruction in Canada

Alex Souchen

UBC Press

304 pages, hardcover, softcover, and ebook

I USED TO BE IN THE WAR JUNK BUSINESS. IN 1998, I became the director and CEO of the Canadian War Museum, in Ottawa, for a two-year term. The museum had two buildings: its exhibit space was in the old Public Archives next to the Royal Canadian Mint, on Sussex Drive, and its storage warehouse was an old streetcar barn in the city's west end.

The museum itself was a pretty dismal affair, with error-filled exhibits, dim lighting, balky elevators, and suspect plumbing. But the warehouse was full of treasures, packed to the rafters with war junk. There were military vehicles of all kinds, wonderful works of art (in a vault that was prone to flooding), and hundreds of large cardboard containers filled with donations from veterans and their families. When I asked the staff to finally open these boxes, they found uniforms, helmets, boots, medals, children's toys, various memorabilia, and even some belongings of General Sir Arthur Currie, commander of the Canadian Corps during the First World War. Currie's war junk, and much more, made its way into exhibits in the War Museum's new building, which opened in 2005.

Many of these unboxed artifacts had to be deaccessioned and given away to other military museums across the country or scrapped. All deaccessions had to be approved by the museum's board of trustees, and I presented them with a long list of items. The only one that attracted comment was for a number of "housewives." I can still remember the collective puzzlement (and perhaps relief) as I explained that every soldier had been issued a housewife — a sewing kit with needles, thread, and buttons. The trustees duly approved their deaccession.

We also had a Panzer I, a rarity from the Wehrmacht's development of armour in the early 1930s. (It had likely come to the museum as the result of Captain Farley Mowat's efforts in finding and sending home German weaponry after VE Day.) Canadians had never faced the Panzer I in battle, and a California organization, the Military Vehicle Technology Foundation, wanted it. After a long negotiation, a deal was consummated and approved. We received in exchange six beautifully restored armoured vehicles: two were Canadian-made, three were made in the United States but used by Canadians, and one was British. This was a terrific bargain, and



One man's war junk is another man's yacht.

these armoured vehicles now have pride of place in the LeBreton Gallery. War junk, indeed.

◆

ALEX SOUCHEN RECENTLY RECEIVED HIS DOCTORATE in history from Western University, and his book, despite its slangy title and its birth as a dissertation, is splendidly researched and uncommonly well written, especially when compared with those of most present-day Canadian historians. While a better title might have been that of his introduction, "The Death and Life of War Machines," this is a detailed and sophisticated examination of how Canada disposed of an enormous inventory of munitions and equipment after the Second World War. "Following the war," Souchen writes, "the physical assets accumulated for the fight were often the only items available for postwar relief, reconstruction, and rehabilitation." As such, these assets were coveted:

Military surpluses traversed a disposal process that reshaped value, utility, and form in competing and sometimes contradictory ways, as leftover materiel was reduced, reused, and recycled into new or different purposes. In that sense, the death of war machines was not something to lament, nor was it the final chapter of an object's existence.

The federal government established the Crown Assets Allocation Committee and the War Assets Corporation in 1943, and over the next five years,

"Canadians fused the tools of war into the tools of peace."

"Victory triggered a global disposal crisis," Souchen explains. "Across every conceivable category of goods, in every belligerent country, the conclusion of hostilities was accompanied by a logistical nightmare of the first order." Indeed, the scale of the disposal problem was enormous. As one American account noted in 1948, "the liquidation of World War II surpluses" was "the largest and most complex distributive operation ever undertaken by a government or business organization." Compared with the American surplus, ours was small, but in Canadian terms it was huge. Throughout the war, we had produced vast quantities of *matériel*: 800 ships; 800,000 military pattern vehicles; 50,000 armoured vehicles; 16,000 aircraft; 1.5 million firearms; and millions of uniforms. Getting rid of it all represented "the largest divestment of public property in Canadian history."

Much of the surplus equipment found its way into the hands of Canadians who repurposed it. Transport aircraft had obvious civilian uses, and so did small naval vessels that were sometimes converted into rich men's playthings. In 1947, for example, the WAC sold the decommissioned frigate HMCS *Stormont* to a Uruguayan broker for \$70,000 (some \$830,000 today). It was then resold to Aristotle Onassis, who spent \$4 million to convert it into his lavish yacht *Christina O*. After other owners tired of it in 2013, they sold the ship for \$34 million (U.S.). More practically, farmers found uses for tracked vehicles (a friend

of mine had a Bren gun carrier on his farm for hauling firewood), and war surplus stores in every city sold uniform jackets, greatcoats, kit bags, and sergeant's stripes.

Ottawa recouped some of the costs of war production in this way, but in a nation that was retooling for peace, the government could not simply dump its vast holdings on the open market all at once, lest it interfere with the production of civilian goods and the jobs that went along with it. So the WAC acted as a distributor, liquidating many assets through the businesses that had produced them during the war:

It grafted operations onto preexisting trade channels and sold only to established manufacturers, dealers, and retailers. Unless the item was claimed by priority holders, the WAC usually sold items at the wholesale level. The companies and dealers that bought the surplus assets then paid to transport, recondition, and repackage them for resale to end-users.

However, not all surplus was dealt with this way. As the war ended, First Canadian Army had its headquarters in Holland, and the Dutch wanted two divisions' worth of equipment for its police and for use in the Dutch East Indies, likely against those Indonesians seeking independence. The two countries struck a deal: Canada owed \$33 million for the costs of occupation, and the army agreed to turn over \$25 million in equipment to help pay that tab. The army also had some 30,000 vehicles parked on an airfield that was transferred to Dutch control in 1946. Somehow, the vehicles came with it. In an economy that had been looted and brutalized by the Nazis, the trucks, tractors, trailers, and motorcycles almost certainly helped to get things going again. Canada apparently received no additional compensation for this transaction, except goodwill. Nonetheless, it was better than simply scrapping the vehicles or paying the costs of shipping them back to Canada, where they would have become a drag on production in Oshawa and Windsor.

Souchen also examines the way the military disposed of conventional explosives and (never used) chemical weapons. Beginning in autumn 1945, the armed forces were dumping some 500 tons a week of these munitions at sea, and they continued until the Ocean Dumping Control Act of 1975. Terrible damage to the marine environment was the inevitable result and, Souchen writes, "an estimated 3,000 dump sites pollute Canada's Atlantic and Pacific coasts with a variety of toxic chemicals, carcinogens, heavy metals, and unexploded ordnance."

In all, Ottawa earned \$500 million in sales by 1949, while simultaneously meeting supply shortages and providing goods to its reconstruction and rehabilitation programs. None of this was easy to manage, but in the immediate post-war period, when civilian goods were still in short supply, Canadians turned "the swords of modern warfare into the ploughshares of peace."

The Canadian War Museum makes it into Souchen's book only once. In late 1945, three thieves broke into the museum, smashed some display cases, and stole weapons. One of them was used in the shooting death of an Ottawa police officer. The tools of war, unfortunately, were not always used as the tools of peace. ▲

BYGONE DAYS

Farmyard Odyssey

A lofty subject

Kelvin Browne

The Truth about the Barn: A Voyage of Discovery and Contemplation

David Elias

Great Plains Publications

168 pages, softcover

IF YOU'VE WONDERED WHY SO MANY BARNs are painted red, David Elias has your answer. Early in *The Truth about the Barn*, the novelist from Winnipeg tells us, "Red dominates barn colour for the same reason we see it so prominently in the primitive cave paintings of Lascaux, France. As pigments go, it was relatively abundant and easily obtainable to our early ancestors." Elias doesn't stop there. He continues with details about why there was "so much ochre lying around" and meanders to a discussion of cosmology, then to God having something to do with it, only to conclude in outer space with a speculation that "extraterrestrial 'barns'" may be red too.

Written with something of a stream-of-consciousness approach, the book engagingly drifts from one folksy rumination to the next. As you hear about runaway farm animals, for instance, it's suddenly about Mollie, the young horse in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. This line of thought then moves to livestock escaping on its way to the slaughterhouse and concludes with a riff about industrialized "big meat." After this we learn that "the idea of a barn was used to explore one of the finer points of epistemology." And then a couple of paragraphs later, it's a discourse about a Potemkin village. It's as if you're overhearing farmers chatting at the local feed store, and you're not too surprised when you discover they all have PhDs.

These philosopher-farmers would no doubt get around to, as *The Truth about the Barn* does, outbuildings in literature, in television, and in movies (everything from Pussy Galore and James Bond's stall romp in *Goldfinger* to young Marty McFly's time-travelling DeLorean crashing into Farmer Peabody's barn). Sprinkled in between are references to quantum mechanics, the attributes of different types of manure, and histories of farm implements, sex in haylofts, and animal husbandry. While much more could be said about stables — that special brand of building that horses call home — it seems there are no more than two degrees of separation between every imaginable subject and barns.

Intermittently, Elias reminisces about the appeal that barns have always had for him: "If that sounds odd, it's only that there are a lot of barns in my past, in fact, in my youth I managed to develop a close personal relationship with quite a number of them, mostly because I spent an inordinate amount of time there as a

farm boy performing menial and often unpleasant tasks."

This farmyard odyssey includes childhood stops at the "cavernous world" of his father's turkey barn in Manitoba, where he raised 30,000 birds at a time. But others objected: "In much the same way Emperor Joseph II took exception to a befuddled young Mozart's latest composition and complained that there [were] simply too many notes, so the neighbouring farmers, still practising animal husbandry in the old humble manner, increasingly held the conviction that my father's barn exceeded tolerable limits, and further, that it involved orders of magnitude both unfamiliar and unwelcome." Elias paints a beguiling picture with his barn factoids. The narrative gives a human dimension that's essential if you're to understand the emotions that make the barn more than just another farm building.

Your ability to appreciate *The Truth about the Barn* may well depend on whether you've experienced a barn other than as a wedding venue or museum. If a part of your life has been on a farm, if you've lived proximate to animals and understood the cycle from planting to harvest, the book could rekindle potent memories. If not, you might feel it's merely a lament for the disappearance of a quaint way of life.

Having once had a visceral connection to a barn, or lacking such a bond, will also shape your perspective of an old building on the site of Apple's sleek new \$5-billion world headquarters, in Cupertino, California. Near this massive Norman Foster building, Steve Jobs insisted on keeping an existing barn, albeit in a completely reimagined landscape, with fountains and drought-resistant plants instead of cultivated cash crops. The sight of Apple's barn could be nostalgic or painful if you grew up on a farm or often visited one; for everyone else, including most of the company's employees, the building is probably just cute — a sanitized shed free of the complexity that Elias's many stories illustrate, not differentiable from what you'd find at Disneyland. It's a barn appropriate for the artificial landscape in which it's marooned, and a triumph of Apple's aesthetic: an artifact rendered almost virtual.

The truth of *The Truth about the Barn* is that barn life, for people and animals, was never easy. Old MacDonald's farm wasn't always happy. It was a place that could be as nurturing as it was cruel, as elegant as it was filthy, and it was usually connected with arduous labour and the terrible risks of weather, disease, injury, and volatile markets. A barn is an icon of a time when many laboured in partnership with nature to survive. To lack a barn was to lack a livelihood. And that is why barns can still enthrall us. ▲

Pier Review

Canada's gateway by the sea

Matthew Lombardi

Pier 21: A History

Steven Schwinghamer and Jan Raska

University of Ottawa Press

260 pages, softcover and ebook

WHEN I WAS THIRTEEN, MY family took a summer trip to the East Coast. For my father, it was his first time in Halifax since he had landed at Pier 21 several decades before. He was just eight when he, his brother, and his parents all stepped off SS *Queen Frederica*, in October 1964, part of a final wave of newcomers before the fabled immigration terminal closed in 1971. I was too young to understand the significance of our visit to the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, which the Pier 21 Society founded in 1999, nor did I notice my father's quiet reflectiveness. But I remember leaving with a bespoke souvenir for my grandparents — a framed photograph of the ship my father's family sailed, marked with the date they disembarked. It still hangs prominently in their foyer in Toronto.

When we visited, the museum bore none of the hallmarks of a national institution; it simply wasn't one yet. Perhaps reflecting the scrappiness of all those new arrivals who passed through it between 1928 and 1971, its true importance wasn't immediately recognized. Only in 2011 did it become Canada's sixth national museum. I recall almost nothing about the physical space, which is perhaps fitting given its beginnings as a tiny freight shed — a mere afterthought in the 1910s commercial scheme that was the Ocean Terminals. That contentious project represented an upgrade to the historic port of Halifax, one focused on trade and transportation infrastructure. It included a new railway through the south end of the city, and it became the region's commercial backbone for a generation.

Pier 21: A History is an energetic effort by Steven Schwinghamer and Jan Raska, two resident historians of the museum, to share representative stories of countless would-be Canadians — among them thousands of Italians like my father, uncle, and grandparents — who came through this gateway. It is also the story of evolving immigration policies, which were gradually liberalized within the narrow parameters of twentieth-century Canada. And though it was not the authors' intention, a reflection on our nation's immigration history and the hard-earned march toward greater cultural openness feels especially pertinent in the wake of COVID-19, which has closed down international borders, paused global migration almost entirely, and brought a spike in anti-foreigner sentiment.

Like many commercial developments of today, the Halifax Ocean Terminals was the target of what we would now call NIMBYism. Plans for a tiny immigration shed, amid such a massive development, barely registered in the fierce local debates. The project itself took over a decade to complete, in part due to the interruption of the First World War, which both increased the demands on the port and slowed construction. Pier 21 finally opened its doors in 1928, when it replaced the old immigration shed at Pier 2.

Since the beginning, officials at Pier 21 made space for voluntary service organizations such as the Salvation Army, the Jewish Immigrant Aid Society, and the Catholic Women's League, who



Two out of every five disembarked at Pier 21.

provided everything from informal translation services to "ditty bags" filled with things like soap, toothpaste, razor blades, and rosaries. Such organizations formed the basis of a support network for newcomers; many became critical advocates for the liberalization of immigration policies on humanitarian grounds. All the while, Pier 21's tight quarters had to accommodate medical screenings, civil interviews, and customs inspections, the last step before one received the coveted "Landed Immigrant" stamp of approval.

"Pier 21 opened just as radical shifts in public health began to affect immigration practice," Schwinghamer and Raska write. "Medical care and expertise around immigration was a lively local political issue, as the city had been

affected by cholera outbreaks and scares in the nineteenth century." As a precondition for visas, officials implemented strict medical screenings prior to departure. Further health checks upon arrival were also the norm; prospective immigrants were denied entry and deported for non-viral conditions such as mental illness.

Less than two years after the pier opened, the Great Depression struck, dropping immigrant intake from over 40,000 annually to just over 1,000. In a move that reflected prevailing prejudices of the day, as well as a soft labour market, only American citizens and British subjects, including those from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Newfoundland, of "sufficient means to maintain" themselves were allowed entry. The overt linkage of immigration inflow and immediate labour demands — a rudimentary precursor to the points-based system that was formally introduced in 1967 — is a recurring theme throughout the pier's history.

Where the First World War influenced the creation of the wider Ocean Terminals facility, the Second World War fundamentally changed its purpose. The onset of fighting reversed the flow of human capital: Pier 21 became the primary departure point for both soldiers and *matériel*. It also served as the entry point for merchant mariners. As they waited for redeployment, many sailors were effectively put to use as temporary foreign workers. The "surprising leniency" of their processing "reflected Canada's acute wartime labour situation and highlighted the persistent connections between immigration and labour regulations." Pier 21 also saw another, somewhat niche form of migration: that of prisoners of war from Germany and elsewhere, who numbered in the thousands. The story of Gotthard Schönfelder, a merchant who supplied U-boats before his capture by Allied forces, is an instructive one. After arriving in Halifax in 1942, the captive German was sent to work on a dairy farm near Ottawa. After the war, Schönfelder returned home only to come back to Canada five years later, this time as a voluntary immigrant sponsored by the same dairy farmer.

Following the Second World War, annual immigration quickly increased to 125,000, and a million newcomers arrived between 1946 and 1955. Two out of every five disembarked at Pier 21. Because nearly one in ten returning servicemen had married overseas, the shed had to process countless war brides, most of whom were British. At the same time, racially restrictive immigration policies gradually loosened — prompted by labour shortages in farming, mining, and forestry. Affected industries aggressively lobbied Ottawa for schemes that ultimately led to the immigration boom that made Pier 21 famous.

On November 7, 1946, despite public opinion against further immigration, Mackenzie King introduced two new immigration schemes:

First, the bulk labour scheme which allowed Canadian employers to specify the number of labour contracts and workers they required, and second, the individual sponsorship scheme, a close-relative plan which permitted Canadian residents to sponsor family members and individuals who were not relatives if employment and housing were guaranteed for them.

The government also recruited displaced persons “from camps in Allied-occupied Germany, Austria, and Italy.” Two months later, in January 1947, it removed Italians from the category of “enemy aliens,” again despite public opposition.

Another liberalizing influence on immigration policy involved Canada’s ambitions as a serious middle power in the emerging world order. International pressure, for example, dictated that Ottawa respond to the mass of displaced persons across Europe, including the likes of Moses Znaimer, who much later co-founded Toronto’s Citytv before heading up ZoomerMedia. As a young boy, he and his family arrived at Pier 21 on SS *Marine Falcon*, in May 1948, among the 34,000 Jews who immigrated to Canada between 1947 and 1952 (approximately 11,000 of them displaced persons).

Still, federal officials struggled to bring the public onside:

In an effort to turn public opinion toward [displaced persons] resettlement as a means to fill Canada’s postwar labour shortage and to provide a humanitarian response to the plight of Europe’s displaced and persecuted, Canadian immigration officials chose a young, blonde-haired Baltic girl as Canada’s 50,000th displaced person under the [International Refugee Organization’s] resettlement plan.

The publicity stunt speaks to prevailing attitudes throughout the country—and in official Ottawa, which largely remained uncomfortable opening the doors too widely. And while the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees was adopted in 1951, Canada did not sign it until 1969, listening instead to the RCMP’s discomfort with potential “undesirables.”

It’s perhaps no surprise that public opinion often lagged behind the labour needs of big business, humanitarian imperatives of the international community, and service-oriented prerogatives of voluntary service organizations. But twentieth-century *realpolitik* should not detract from the merry mythmaking that surrounds Pier 21, now considered a beacon of Canadian openness. This is how democracies function. If anything, Schwinghamer and Raska’s clear-eyed examination of immigration policies, through the lens of a single port of entry, demonstrates the impressive and hard-won gains of our modern immigration system. It also bolsters the fact that Canadians have an honest broker of our nation’s history in their sole surviving ocean immigration shed. For this, and for the nearly one million whom Pier 21 welcomed to our shores, we should all be proud. I know I am. ▲

THIS AND THAT

Death Becomes Us

On the universal experience

Kevin Keystone

Nobody Ever Talks about Anything but the End: A Memoir of Loss

Liz Levine

Simon & Schuster

304 pages, softcover and ebook

How to Die: A Book about Being Alive

Ray Robertson

Biblioasis

182 pages, softcover and ebook

LIZ LEVINE IS AN EXPERT IN DEATH. The writer, director, and producer—best known for her work on Kyra Sedgwick’s *Story of a Girl* and Douglas Coupland’s *JPod*—lost both her maternal grandparents, a sister (to stillbirth), and several friends before she even finished high school. The loss has only continued into adulthood: “I’ve been to more funerals than I am years old. And given more eulogies than most people will in a lifetime.”

Nobody Ever Talks about Anything but the End is primarily about two of those deaths: Levine’s sister Tamara, to suicide, and her first love turned best friend Judson, to Burkitt’s leukemia. With a fragmented structure and chronology, not unlike memories of loved ones lost, the book explores Levine’s relationships with Tamara, with Judson, and with her own feelings. From “Teflon” avoidance to acceptance and vulnerability, her internal conflict propels the narrative and, ultimately, a personal transformation.

Levine’s relationship with Judson is a smooth one. They grow up just blocks apart in the 1980s; their dads are lawyers at the same Toronto firm. Levine describes her teenage late-night goodbyes with her boyfriend as “snow-jacket hugs and runny-nose kisses.” The young couple break up at fifteen and Judson later comes out as gay, but their love remains undiminished, only changed. When he is diagnosed with cancer at twenty-seven and dies the following year, Levine is heartbroken; she misses him and medicates with cocaine.

The relationship with Tamara is more complicated. From an early age, Levine is suspicious of her younger sister. At seven, Tamara attempts to sabotage their parents’ amicable divorce by exaggerating stories of their respective dating lives. At ten, Tamara tells her principal that their father has been sexually abusing Liz, “to see what would happen.” As the years go by and the lies and delusions worsen, Levine’s pleas for intervention go largely dismissed, especially by her mother, a psychologist. A united family front isn’t established until after Tamara’s psychotic break, at thirty-four, and subsequent diagnosis of psychosis with paranoid delusions.

Levine copes with humour, boundaries, and distance, but Tamara’s illness takes its toll, seen most clearly in Levine’s reflections after her sister’s death. “I don’t really miss her,” she writes, with characteristic frankness. “She has not been a part of my daily life for decades. While I note her absence at family affairs, it is more with a sigh of relief than a twinge of loss—because these moments are easier without her.”

It’s now something of a Brené Brown truism that vulnerability is the source of wholeheartedness and joy. But for Levine, it is a revelation borne out by personal experience. Months after Tamara’s death, on a drive from Toronto to Vancouver, she experiences an intense catharsis, for both Judson and her sister. “I only wish I’d known about feeling from the start,” she says. “I wish someone had told me that vulnerability is like a superpower.”



WITH *HOW TO DIE*, RAY ROBERTSON TAKES AN altogether different tack on the subject that seems all around us today. The author of a dozen books—including *Why Not? Fifteen Reasons to Live*, something of a prequel to this new work—concedes he’s not really an expert in the subject of death. “What do you know about death?” a friend asked while Robertson was writing the book. “As much as anybody who hasn’t died yet, I guess.”

While Levine grapples with the loss of others, Robertson invites us primarily to contemplate our own mortality as a route to a better life: “If we gain a better understanding of what death is, we’ll also know more of what life consists.” Throughout the slim volume, he peregrinates over a great many ideas: a cemetery as “ego corrective,” the metaphysics of monsters, even a spirited, Malthusian argument in favour of life-threatening diseases like cancer (I wonder what he thinks of the coronavirus). He peppers his meditations with anecdotes and choice quotations, from Cicero to Montaigne to Sontag.

On the relative merits of cremation versus burial, Robertson argues that “nothing and no one is remembered for very long” and that “the bigger the tomb, the larger the delusion.” He writes, “Ashes in the sea or bones at the bottom of a hole, we’re all poor Yoricks.” He’s right, of course: unless one believes in the afterlife, reincarnation, or some other persistence of the soul, dead is dead. “Silence. End scene.”

Except it isn’t, exactly—at least not as Levine helps frame things. What remains after the body is either burned or decomposing is the scars, mysteries, unreconciled griefs, and traumas that stay with the living and can travel down through generations. The person may be gone, but in grappling with their legacy, it only means we have less to work with. ▲

Dear Prudence

A life of exuberance and eccentricity

Liam Lacey

Nanaimo Girl: A Memoir

Prudence Emery

Cormorant Books

288 pages, softcover

NOW EIGHTY-FOUR, PRUDENCE Emery apprenticed at Expo 67, managed public relations for the Savoy Hotel, and became Canada's longest-serving movie publicist. *Nanaimo Girl: A Memoir* is her frolicsome recounting of an eventful life as the light behind the stars.

Who arranged for Pierre Elliott Trudeau to go to the London premiere of *Funny Girl*, where he met and began dating Barbra Streisand? Prudence Emery, of course. Who swapped clothes with Sophia Loren and arranged to take her children out trick-or-treating in Toronto? Pru, that's who. And you can guess who found a private beach for Paul McCartney and his family in the Bahamas when they were besieged by fans.

"Where are you from?" asked McCartney. "Nanaimo," said Emery. "I wouldn't worry about that if I were you," advised the ex-Beatle.

On the contrary, Emery sees her connection to Nanaimo, a coal-mining harbour town of 6,000 at the time of her birth in 1936, as the key to her ability to play with the famous. The third-person character of "Nanaimo Girl," referred to more than thirty times in the book, has long possessed a superpower of staying down-to-earth with anyone: "I grabbed Sir Laurence Olivier by the hand and dragged him through the reception. Was I brash or what! Credit Nanaimo Girl here."

Brash is only half the story. I met Emery at the launch of David Cronenberg's sex-and-collision drama, *Crash*, at the 1996 Cannes Film Festival, where she stood out with her bright red hair and colourful designer clothes like a peacock among the grey journalist pigeons. But she was quietly helpful, with watchful eyes and just the hint of a mischievous smirk. Emery has a mild-wild duality, much like Cronenberg, a filmmaker she worked with ten times. He once said of his favourite publicist, "Pru's unique. She's a one-off. She makes it fun. She plays the eccentric edges and the oblique angles, and that's a gift."

The instinct for eccentricity seems to be inherited. Her father, an ophthalmologist, liked to amuse people by walking down the stairs on his hands and impersonating Charlie Chaplin as Hitler in *The Great Dictator*. Her mother, by contrast, played the piano and arranged elocution and dance lessons for her daughter, before shipping Pru off to an English-style boarding school in Victoria to "learn my manners." That experience gave young Pru a patina of posh, while hardening her rebellious streak.

At the age of twenty, she planned a year in London — which somehow turned into five. She attended art school haphazardly and had a variety of odd jobs and lovers. Her recollections of those years have the fizz of a P. G. Wodehouse story: "Next, we all went off to Covent Garden, as the pubs opened there at 4:00 a.m. for the market growers. I wore an Eliza Doolittle hat, which Mum had given me, decorated with fake grapes, and I serenaded all the truckers with songs from *My Fair Lady* while they plied me with real grapes. In the pub I met a funny old Scotsman who claimed to have fallen in love with me and suggested we sell red cabbages together."



Before they invented extension buttons.

Even as Pru assured her parents that "life in London is très gai," her mother asked in a letter, "What the devil is going on over there? Egad!"

Back in Canada, a job at the visitors' centre at Expo 67 brought Emery to a more passionate calling as chaperone of the stars: Liberace with his sequins; Hugh Hefner and two busty blonds; Twiggy and Justin, her hairdresser-manager; and Haile Selassie, the emperor of Ethiopia, with his chihuahua, Lulu.

Throughout her memoir, Emery recounts how opportunities tumbled into her lap, without analyzing the combination of well-bred and plebeian qualities that made people like and trust her. On a holiday to London after Expo, she had a chance meeting with Hugh Wontner,

head of the Savoy Hotel group. He took a shine to her over lunch and immediately offered her the public relations job for his flagship hotel.

The Savoy's perks included a desk with a "booze button" for her hard-guzzling Fleet Street friends. Along with the flowing champagne ("In those days, I could tell Lanson from Dom Perignon, or Tattinger from Bollinger"), there were comped hotel rooms in Paris and Switzerland and fancy cars. There was also a superabundance of celebrities — Al Capp, Elaine Stritch, Ginger Rogers, Robert Shaw — tapping on her office door or sharing drinks. Once a journalist from *Weekend* magazine arrived from Canada, intending to interview Bernadette Devlin, the firebrand Irish MP, but Devlin was sick. Would the reporter settle for Sir Noël Coward instead?

Emery's love life "bobbed like a duck in a storm," with few dry spells. In one of the book's better zingers, she recalls a lover who was inspired to romance only "when we had consumed an entire bottle of Scotch." Who was she kidding, she asks. "Looking back, now that I'm older, I should have made better choices with my Scotch."

When she reached her late thirties, and having grown weary of champagne and frivolity, Emery returned to Canada, in the mid-1970s. After gigs at the newly launched Global TV and the Metropolitan Toronto Zoo, she started her life as a freelance film publicist with a Canuxploitation classic, Bob Clark's sorority-slasher cult flick from 1974, *Black Christmas*.

The gay pirouettes of *Nanaimo Girl's* early chapters turn into a bit more of a trudge as Emery recounts moments from many movies made in Canada and around the world. A few of these films are celebrated (*Good Will Hunting* and *Eastern Promises*, for example) but many are forgotten. If you were inclined to feel sorry for the unmarried globe-hopping publicist, don't bother. She notes, in passing, "In between pictures I took on other projects and quite a few lovers."

This breezy behind-the-scenes showbiz read is a reminder that even the brightest stars like to touch ground and get invited to play. The clue to Pru, the whimsical impulse that guided her career, is best captured in her story of meeting Edward Albee, the notoriously grouchy *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* playwright, at Expo. Her initial impression was that Albee was "just plain withdrawn."

"Feeling a little stressed out on the piazza outside the Canadian pavilion, I impulsively grabbed Edward and his boy-friend's hands and said, 'Let's skip!' And skip we did. That broke the ice, and Edward became a friend forever and never ceased to tease me." ▲

Quiz Master

And now, here is the host of *Jeopardy!*

Peter Mansbridge

The Answer Is . . . : Reflections on My Life

Alex Trebek

Simon & Schuster

304 pages, hardcover, ebook, and audiobook

EVERYONE KNOWS ALEX TREBEK. Well, almost everyone. Let's face it: he's one of the most popular, most highly paid game show hosts in North America. Since its debut in 1984, he's been the face of *Jeopardy!*, which annoyingly challenges you, in the form of answers, to ask questions as you build up your pot against your competitors.

Now, most Canadians who eagerly await *Jeopardy!* each evening also know this about Trebek: he's one of us. Well, actually, he's a dual U.S.-Canadian citizen, but he wasn't running for leader of the Conservative Party so that fact hardly matters. And if you ever doubted his Canadianness, you'd be wrong. He could not, even if he wanted to, erase Canada from his past.

I mean, listen to this guy's history: he's truly a Canuck. Born and raised in the Nickel Belt, in Sudbury, he was a curler. No kidding. That suave Los Angeles guy who controls the buzzer used to yell "Hurry hard!" as he watched granite rocks slide down sheets of ice. He quarterbacked his high school football team, which sounds very American, but he played three downs, not four. And there's more: Trebek worked for the CBC. He hosted a music show and interviewed Glenn Gould. His first game show was *Reach for the Top*. He covered horse racing at Woodbine. And — drum roll, please — he even hosted the national news (only a few times, but it's right there on the resumé). So you get the picture. Trebek is a Canadian and clearly proud of it because in his book, *The Answer Is . . .*, he spends a lot of time setting up the reflections on his life by talking about his early days in Sudbury and in Ottawa, where he went to university.

He then spent a dozen years working for the CBC, which shaped his broadcasting experience. But it was clear early on that he was going to make it beyond the Corporation. I remember our paths crossed in the early 1970s, when he was based in Toronto and I was in the city on a journalism training course from Winnipeg. I was just starting out, but he was already very established and well known. I saw him in the hallway of the old radio building on Jarvis Street. He smiled, said hello, and kept walking. He wouldn't remember this, but I remember him as someone who didn't get caught up with stardom. Probably even today, there's still a lot of small-town Sudbury in him.

And that seems partly why, after years of being asked to tell his story and saying no, he's finally



You can wager a lot on Alex Trebek's Canadianness.

decided to do just that. As most know, he's been fighting a battle with stage four pancreatic cancer. It's a battle he knows he's very unlikely to win. The treatments have been encouraging, but he's remained realistic about his chances throughout what has clearly been an ordeal. His show has been on a hiatus most of this year, because of the pandemic, but it's planning to resume taping soon, and Trebek is determined that he will be there to host it when it does.

As much as he knew that *Jeopardy!* and its host were popular, he's been surprised by just how much. His illness has shown him. Inside the *Jeopardy!* studio, there's a huge glass container with thousands of get-well cards and notes that fans from around the world have sent to cheer him up. While reading some of them, Trebek realized that while his fans know him, they don't really know him. So he decided he'd tell them. And that's what we've got with these pages: Trebek's thoughts on everything from marriage and parenthood to spirituality and his impressive record of philanthropy in North America and, especially, in Africa.

But mainly this book is about the art of the game show, and for the millions who are addicted to them and wonder how they work, it will not disappoint. If you're looking for more, you might have to go deep to find it.



NEAR THE END OF *THE ANSWER IS . . .*, TREBEK GETS very personal. You feel his vulnerability as he describes a conversation with his doctor, about the various treatments available to try to fight his

cancer. He knows the odds are not in his favour and that eventually he may have to consider other options about making "the end" comfortable. His doctor mentions "hospice"—a word Trebek's been avoiding all along. He ponders just what hospice living means: "They want to make it as easy as it can possibly be for you to transition into whatever future you happen to believe in." And while he concedes that he doesn't believe in any specific god, if there is ever a time to believe in God, this might be it. "What have you got to lose?" he concludes.

I get why Alex Trebek decided to write this book. I understand his motivation because I've found myself in the same sorts of situations as Trebek does, with many of those who watched me for years at the CBC. They still stop me on the street, at airports, in shopping centres (when we used to frequent such places) with lines like "I've watched you all my life" or "My mother loves you" or "I've watched the world unfold through your eyes." It's all heady stuff, but while you understand that they truly appreciate the role you've played in their lives, they don't really know you. And that presents another question: Do they really want to? Or are you simply the comfy vehicle in which they're entertained, challenged, or informed?

What we do know is this: Trebek is a very talented, extremely likeable guy, and the business and Canada are lucky to be able to call him theirs. So, in true *Jeopardy!* form, the correct answer is: "Who is Alex Trebek?" Well, you're about to find out. ▲

Personal Battlegrounds

The enigma of Timothy Findley

Keith Garebian

Tiff: A Life of Timothy Findley

Sherrill Grace

Wilfrid Laurier University Press

540 pages, hardcover

A FORMER DANCER AND PROFESSIONAL actor, Timothy Irving Frederick Findley, or Tiff to his family and friends, enjoyed performing as a public speaker and, more interestingly, as a writer. He wrote plays that dealt with the problems of his own psyche, and many of his short stories and novels contain stage directions, or what could be regarded as such. His best novels — *The Wars* and *Famous Last Words*, for example — have an innate sense of the theatre in their use of dialogue, characterization, and plot. Findley certainly found photographs, letters, and diaries inspiring, but he instinctively went for scenes with dramatic intensity, silences filled with significance, and a narrative voice that could sound like an onstage monologue.

As Sherrill Grace points out in her new workmanlike biography, Tiff's journals help highlight the writer as performer: "The page serves as a mirror in which he observes himself posing, performing, talking to himself, or trying out a gesture or a phrase." But in treating these journals as "the connective tissue between the external facts of his life and the transformation of personal memory and experiences in his art," Grace emphasizes links between the writer's life and fiction much more than she focuses on the special theatricality of, say, *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, *Headhunter*, and *Pilgrim* — works that play out the peculiarly exaggerated fantasies that are sometimes akin to Murakami's surrealism and Rushdie's magic realism. A professor emeritus at the University of British Columbia, Grace acknowledges that she never met Findley, which limits her ability to truly know the human behind the writing. However, she has a biographer's bounty in his early journals, two published memoirs, interviews, letters to close friends, and public addresses, all of which help reduce the distance between biographer and subject. And she did get to befriend William Whitehead, Tiff's life partner and faithful sounding board for ideas, dialogue, and cadence. Bill had an academic background and was also briefly an actor, but he turned into an acclaimed writer of CBC documentaries on science and history. Tiff became his significant collaborator on such award-winning shows as *The National Dream*, *The Whiteoaks of Jalna*, and *Dieppe 1942*.

Possessing a sharp ear for dialogue and a keen eye for detail, Findley heard and saw more than he could possibly express in his writing, though he often overwrote, even in his plays. Grace's



He heard and saw more than he could possibly express.

biography (ten years in the making) is cautious rather than daring, respectful rather than risk-taking. At the outset, she carefully explains the hurdles a biographer faces, while holding fast to facts about Tiff's upbringing as a conflicted member of a white middle-class family in the privileged Toronto enclave of Rosedale.

Born in 1930 and embarrassed by the cultural deficiencies of his youth, Findley educated himself in music, fine art, and literature, appreciating the inestimable value of imagination. But living wasn't easy. Grace dutifully charts how depression and death haunted Tiff, who was afraid of dying before his time. He had reasons: His father's older brother died at eleven, after brain surgery performed on a kitchen table. Another uncle, Irving, died in his thirties, following complications from a war injury. Tiff's mother, Margaret Bull, saw her parents divorce; her brother and father die tragically; her mesmerizing sister, Ruth, treated for madness. As Grace painstakingly shows, many of these ancestors were turned into characters in Tiff's stories and novels, especially *The Piano Man's Daughter*, where he darkened their tone. The deepest darkness in his fiction, however, the apocalyptic horrors in *Headhunter*, sprang out of his knowledge of the Holocaust, fascism, and abuse. It was as if he had looked into the very heart of humanity and discovered Conrad's Kurtz lurking there.

Emotionally abused by his alcoholic father, Allan, who cheated on Margaret, Tiff was mocked for his homosexuality by his older brother, Michael, another self-destructive alcoholic.

Tormented by his own profound fears of failure as a man and as a writer, young Tiff identified with Shakespeare's Richard III, "the most aberrant human being in all of English literature," as he phrased it in *Inside Memory*. The exaggeration would be consistent with other moments of self-aggrandizement, as in his absurd attempt to drown himself, during one of his alcoholic states, by jumping off the Waterloo Street Bridge (now the William Hutt Bridge) in Stratford, Ontario, into knee-high water. Tiff threatened suicide multiple times, though the threats were also, essentially, theatrical, as was the voice in his published journals, *Inside Memory* and the posthumous *Journeyman*, where he was able to reveal himself to himself (in what I consider to be a form of soliloquy).

THE BIOGRAPHY'S EARLY PACE IS STIFF, BUT ONCE Grace leaves Tiff's ancestors to focus on how he became a reviser of life and craft, and to consider how his life and career intersected with those of many major artists of his time (the likes of Alec Guinness, Peter Brook, Ruth Gordon, Thornton Wilder, Margaret Laurence, and Glenn Gould), the book grows in colour and importance. Tiff was "an obsessive collector: he tried to keep every letter, gift, book, record, and draft of his many novels, stories, plays, and other writing." His desk and shelves bore such things as a framed photo of Elizabeth Taylor in her prime, a crucifix, a small stuffed unicorn, family photos, and a teddy bear named Sebastian. This need to preserve possessions predated his life with Bill;

BORIS SPREMO; TORONTO STAR VIA GETTY IMAGES

it helps to demonstrate how he valued memory and the axiom that we are what we keep.

Through occasional anecdote, Grace shows how Tiff's imagination and humanist zeal saved him from despair. He "was often angry with this world, most especially with human beings and with himself; he could be violent when drunk and he drank a lot, but he was also full of laughter and joy." She maintains that he "constantly faced a paralyzing loneliness compounded by his search for artistic perfection," ascribing his existential problem to conflicts with his father and elder brother (Tiff's baby brother did not survive infancy), while also suggesting some of the demons that raged within him because of his sexuality. There are interesting nuggets of information on this latter score: a teenaged Tiff seeking sex in parks and ravines; a very short-lived *ménage à deux* with the actor William Hutt, who remained his closest and most trusted friend apart from Bill; a shadowy relationship with the British actor Alec Guinness (a married man and father), who mentored Tiff's nascent stage career in London while expecting sexual gratification in return; a failed live-in relationship with the actor Alec McCowen, with whom he stayed friends; an unpublished and unperformed first play about a young man's rejection by another young man; suffering the director Peter Brook's lacerating scorn for feminizing Osric, accompanied by Brook's threat of feeding Tiff's carcass to "the Leather Queens of Brighton"; an indecently brief marriage to Janet Reid, from Winnipeg, in 1959 (he eventually apologized for his own sexual confusion in a deeply tender and loving letter to her); and then his long-term relationship with Whitehead, though the two were sexually incompatible and sought sex with others.

The information on Tiff's deeply wounded psyche rates far higher with me than Grace's voluminous plot summaries or even her sedate evaluations of his literary achievements. She praises far more than is necessary — even his inferior first two novels, *The Last of the Crazy People* and *The Butterfly Plague* — but she does reveal his working methods, an asset in any literary biography. *The Wars* made him a major literary figure in Canada, but *Famous Last Words* is his masterpiece (despite what the supercilious British critics felt), with its huge canvas of history depicting real and invented characters and an intriguing central figure, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, lifted out of Ezra Pound and transformed by Tiff's own genius. Even Tiff's father praised the novel when it appeared in 1981, and the two finally settled their fraught relationship, though psychological scars remained with the writer to his dying day.

Life often counts more than literature, and, like most biographies, this one gains from sensational episodes. Revelations of Tiff's drunken binges, periodically violent behaviour, and chronic self-doubts help with portraiture. He struggled to find the right career, giving up acting after stints at Canada's Stratford Festival and in England, where he was sometimes criticized for overly balletic movement. He turned to writing. On this count, he was greatly encouraged by the American star Ruth Gordon (he played small roles opposite her in Thornton Wilder's *The Matchmaker*). Gordon and her husband, Garson Kanin, gave him a typewriter, money, and moral support. Wilder, too, was a big help, assuring Tiff that he was a genuine writer, while advising him, "Pay attention, Findley. Pay attention. That is all

you have to do." Easier said than done, especially when Tiff's personal life and inner demons were causing a tormenting lack of inner faith. But Wilder also played the role of wise psychologist, urging Findley to forgive himself for being human and to stop punishing himself for perceived failures and guilt — rather akin to what Guinness and McCowen also told him.

Grace asserts that 1955, Tiff's last year in England, proved crucial for his development as a writer. Approaching his twenty-fifth birthday, he was able to find his own voice in three short stories — "The Name's the Same," "War," and "About Effie" — and realized that he needed to return to Canada. For too long, he had felt like a boy from the colonies, uncomfortable in such a class-conscious place.

In the biography, Tiff gradually emerges as someone who understood, as Grace phrases it, "the slipperiness of life stories." So he made "telling the difference between truth and lies a central theme in his fiction." This slipperiness extended beyond his work, of course. Although he espoused and cherished integrity, he preferred reticence to disclosure about his sexual identity, thereby earning the mockery of gay militants who did not take into account his and Bill's many acts of charity toward Casey House and AIDS victims, or his sensitive renderings of gay and bisexual characters in *The Wars*, *The Stillborn Lover*, and *Elizabeth Rex*.

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A JUST SUMMATION OF FINDLEY'S LIFE AND CAREER must acknowledge the following: he helped found the Writers' Union of Canada, he served as president of PEN Canada, and he championed many humanist and humanitarian causes while attacking political tyranny, censorship, pedophilia, and other outrages, such as homophobia and environmental pollution. Throughout it

all, he was a living paradox, giving rise to a key unanswered question in this book. Considering all his vacillations between "arrogant confidence" and "crushing self-doubt," did he suffer from manic depression or schizophrenia? After his brief marriage ruptured, he suffered a breakdown and was institutionalized (Grace provides no details), though he ultimately managed, with the help of the psychiatrist Edward Turner and his warm, loyal friends to battle despair and make books that will endure. (The list of such friends is long. It includes William Hutt, the dance teacher Janet Baldwin, the poet Phyllis Webb, the literary agents Nancy and Stan Colbert, Jean Roberts, Marigold Charlesworth, Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, and Graeme Gibson.) And in Bill Whitehead, he found the perfect helpmate, because as Bill remarked (before his own death in 2018): "Tiff needed someone to look after him, and I needed someone to look after." Their forty-year relationship yields some of the best scenes — dramatic or comic — in the biography.

Tiff famously said, "Once before I die, I hope to *know* I've been heard." After an abundance of awards and honours, he surely knew that he had, indeed, been heard to advantage. Yet the fatal stalking continued. By spring 2002, he found his heart, lungs, and kidney were failing. He had chronic trouble breathing, walking, and sleeping. And when death did come to him later that year, it was at Cotignac, his beloved French retreat. (His other homes with Whitehead were Stone Orchard, an old farmhouse in Cannington, Ontario, and Stratford, where he was ultimately lionized.)

For all of Timothy Findley's flaws, he was a true Canadian icon, and Sherrill Grace shows us with *Tiff* some significant reasons why his life and career continue to matter. ▲



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R•M
ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

The Quiet Canadian

Fictional encounters with Leonard Cohen

Tom Jokinen

A Theatre for Dreamers

Polly Samson

Bloomsbury

368 pages, hardcover, softcover, and ebook

IN *THE COLOSSUS OF MAROUSSI*, HENRY Miller calls Hydra “aesthetically perfect,” as if it had been designed to inspire artists like him. Generations of poets, painters, and artists of all stripes seem to agree, having gone to the car-free Greek island to create, and to get in the way of sponge fishers for whom aesthetics are beside the point. Sophia Loren and Maria Callas often frequented it, while Lawrence Durrell lived among the ruins. So did Leonard Cohen. In September 1960, having just turned twenty-six, he bought a house with no electricity for \$1,500 (U.S). “All through the day,” he wrote to his mother, “you hear the calls of the street vendors and they are really rather musical.”

Hydra has survived, in the post-sponge era, on the muse economy: feeding and watering foreign artists. The heyday was the late 1950s and early '60s, when Cohen was there and met Marianne Ihlen, whom he would make famous in song (“Bird on the Wire” and, of course, “So Long, Marianne”). On Hydra, he hung out with the troubled writers Charmian Clift and George Johnston. This was before bohemian went mainstream, but just barely. It was bright sun, blue water, and retsina. It was young, attractive, and barefoot people spending trust funds while writing poetry, before going home to work in advertising. But there were exceptions: Cohen’s crowd, for the most part, were the real thing.

Polly Samson’s *A Theatre for Dreamers* is a novel of that moment. The English writer knows the place. She and her husband, David Gilmour, from the band Pink Floyd, have a house on the island. Her ease with location makes for vivid scenes, where octopuses are “strung like old tights along a boat rope at the jetty” and “marble slabs shine from centuries of use.” This is a coming-of-age story. Samson’s narrator is her stand-in, Erica, an English teenager who arrives with a brother who wants to be a painter and with a boyfriend who wants to be a poet. Her mother has just died and left her some money. The trip is a quest, to find her mother’s friend Charmian, a writer who can help Erica better understand who she’s lost.

The real Charmian Clift was married to the Australian journalist George Johnston. Their home on Hydra was a clearing house for young talent. Marianne Ihlen, for one, showed up with her husband, Axel Jensen, an abusive Norwegian man-baby who left Marianne for another woman, in plain sight. Leonard Cohen arrived the same year, carrying a typewriter and



The rather musical island of Hydra.

a guitar with a rope as a strap — “his charisma relentless,” in Samson’s portrait.

The novel is the fictionalized story of Erica and Charmian as her surrogate mother, set against the domestic drama of young artists wrestling “with the muses on their home turf.” This, after all, is the attraction of Greece: art starts here, and only a loser fails to be inspired. But the book digs deeper and asks, What are the human costs of art?

Early on, Marianne gifts Erica, her new friend, a heart-shaped rock that she has found. She calls it “a talisman” and adds with a giggle that “maybe it’s the petrified heart of Orpheus.” Samson calls on the Orphic myth more than once, to good effect. Remember, Orpheus is given a free pass to the underworld to retrieve Eurydice, his lost love. But the rules are clear: He can’t look at her. If he does, he loses her. Of course, he looks at her and is punished as promised.

For the philosopher Maurice Blanchot, that’s the story of art right there: Eurydice is what art can achieve, and Orpheus, the artist, has to travel to the darkest place to find it. In the end, if his approach is too direct, he loses it — the poem, the song, the painting. He can only ever hint at the truth, translate it obliquely, never actually touch it. In short, the story of Orpheus is about the impossibility of art and of being an artist, except for those who know not to look it in the eye.

Marianne’s faithless Axel Jensen fits the bill: barking mad and threatening suicide (“a bit

Kerouac for my taste,” says the fictionalized Charmian). Then there’s Charmian’s George Johnston, a difficult man who needs care, feeding, and daily antibiotic injections. The male poets and painters on Hydra need their women to take care of the day-to-day details — the cooking of lamb and the laundering of sheets — while they work at their often violent visions. Charmian is only half joking when she refers to the women of Hydra as “ministering angels.” This is another of Samson’s recurring themes: the women who roll their eyes at the men who make noise and precious little else but are nonetheless their nursemaids. The exception is Cohen.

Cohen is a sensible, smarter Orpheus, with lyre strung over his shoulder on a rope. He knows the rules of the underworld: don’t look back at Eurydice, find your art not through hubris but by indirection. After all, he is Canadian. Tell a Canadian not to look at Eurydice, and he’s not going to look at Eurydice. “Our Canadian friend,” his island mates call him. Unlike the hedonists on Hydra, he spends his time at work, writing. We see him lowering his eyes through cigarette smoke in silent observation. He is a man of few words, and those he offers are Talmudic. “Leonard gives off an unmistakable air of a man who has always been there before you,” Samson’s narrator, Erica, tells us. “He possesses that old-soul thing of wisdom more ancient than his body and his face.” At one point, while discussing Sartre’s story “Intimacy,” Charmian quotes his line that “a woman doesn’t have a

right to spoil her life for some impotent." And for his part, the fictionalized Leonard Cohen doesn't want to be that: "If there are things to fight against, let's do it in health and in sanity. I don't want to become a mad poet, I want to become a healthy man who can face the things that are around me." Cohen is the good guy, if deliberately cryptic.

Of course, the Canadian ends up with the girl, Marianne, but that part is fated. "When there are meals on the table, order in the upkeep of the house and harmony, it's the perfect moment to start some serious work," he says to his friends over a fireside meal. "When there is food on the table, when the candles are lit, when you wash the dishes together, and put the child to bed together. That is order, that is spiritual order, there is no other." With a fishing boat called *The Twelve Apostles* moored nearby, the scene is a kind of last supper, with L. C. as J. C. — maybe a bit heavy-handed, but the times call for it: the world is about to change.

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WHEN YOU WANT AN UNASSAILABLE GOOD GUY IN your fiction, make him a Canadian artist. It's what the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard did with *The Loser*, his novel from 1983. *The Loser* is a feverish (it's nearly a single paragraph) first-person rant about two men who study music under Vladimir Horowitz in the early 1950s, and whose fellow student is the pianist Glenn Gould, whom the narrator refers to as "our Canadian friend." Let's not ruin a darkly funny and unsettling tale with too much plot revelation, except to say that the two friends immediately give up the piano once they hear Gould play, so overwhelming is his talent. *The Loser* is a book about the broken promise of artistic ambition. Except for Gould, of course. "Year in, year out," says Bernhard's narrator, "he wore the same kind of pants, if not the same pants, his step was light, or as my father would have said, noble. He loved things with sharp contours, detested approximation." Like the fictionalized Cohen, this version of Gould values spiritual order.

Bernhard, though, is caught up with the story of the losers: the narrator and his friend Wertheimer, the two who can't match Gould's talent and confidence. Gould just plays the piano, nothing to it. The notes fly off the oddly held fingers. It's as if he's untroubled by music, life, the mystery of art. (In real life, of course, Gould was troubled by everything, including the weather. But this is a novel.) For the other two, the piano is a hopeless battle. Wertheimer can't take it. He kills himself.

Troubled, complex, and difficult characters — like Axel Jensen in *A Theatre for Dreamers* and Wertheimer of *The Loser* — are less perfectly dull, less Canadian than the holy man Leonard Cohen or the genius Glenn Gould. Perhaps the Canadian who appears in non-Canadian fiction has a purpose: to look smarter and more together than the mucked-up romantic hero, to fulfill some kind of global stereotype of sensibility and righteousness. That's Cohen, that's Gould, that's Marshall McLuhan showing up to set everyone straight in *Annie Hall*, that's even Dudley Do-Right in the Bullwinkle cartoons — dim-witted but loyal and true to Nell and his country. Quiet Canadians, the world thinks, have it all figured out (don't tell them the truth). And when we turn up in fiction, film, and pop culture, we are the most together and least interesting characters in the mix. ▲

LITERATURE

Found in Translation

The gender politics of South Korea

Sheima Benembarek

WHEN KIM JIYOUNG WAS BORN, her mother, Oh Misook, wept over the misfortune of bringing another girl into the world. "It's okay," her mother-in-law said. "The third will be a boy." There was such pressure to produce a son that when Oh Misook fell pregnant again, she resorted to a secret sex-selective abortion. The practice was gaining popularity in South Korea at the time, as if girls were a medical problem. And when she finally delivered a boy, her two daughters took a back seat.

Years later, Jiyoung lives in Seoul, where her roles as wife and stay-at-home mother are predestined, expected. She builds a short career in marketing — curbed by marrying and having a child of her own — in a company where she is passed over for promotions because her employer "did not think of female employees as prospective long-term colleagues." We meet her when the everyday oppression has driven her to a mental health collapse.

Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982, the third novel by the former scriptwriter Cho Nam-Joo, quickly became a publishing phenomenon. When it came out in 2016, it stirred the Korean public, generating a controversy anchored in gender politics that highlighted the seemingly banal injustices women face. A bestseller throughout Asia, it has sold over a million copies, has been translated into eighteen languages, and was recently made into a film. Cho emphasizes the tragic ordinariness of Jiyoung's experience before the narrative even begins: her name is one of the most common for girls of her generation. Kim Jiyoung, the reader is primed to understand, is emblematic of the everywoman.

The novel's publication coincided with the beginnings of the South Korean version of #MeToo, dubbed #WithYou. The campaign has its roots in the 2016 protests over the brutal murder of a twenty-three-year-old woman near Gangnam Station in Seoul. The man who killed her, never having met her before, claimed he was tired of being "ignored" by women. Another pivotal event: the televised interview in 2018 of a public prosecutor, Seo Ji-hyun, where she accused a justice official of sexually harassing her. South Korea remains at the bottom of *The Economist's* glass-ceiling index, which evaluates environments for working women, and it has one of the biggest gender pay gaps in the developed world. Cho includes 2014 data that puts Korean women's earnings at 63 percent of what their male counterparts make.

While it is a fictional account, the novel is peppered with facts and footnotes; Cho annotates again and again. The story is chronicled in simple, stark reportage style, structured

around four main parts: Childhood, 1982–1994, Adolescence, 1995–2000, Early Adulthood, 2001–2011, and Marriage, 2012–2015. Again, this is more than one woman's tale.

Janie Yoon, who acquired the book for House of Anansi Press, notes that whenever a title truly captures the public's attention, you have to consider the timing. Is it just good fortune, or is the subject matter hitting a nerve in the collective consciousness? In this case, that connection to current concerns has been a big part of the novel's success, she explains over a Zoom conversation from her home in Toronto.

"I was amazed at how accurately it depicts the way women are treated, the way things are just assumed from the moment you're born," says Yoon, who is also of South Korean background. "These things are just part of the culture because it's very much influenced by an extremely hierarchical Confucian belief system." But the sexism that Jiyoung experiences isn't happening just in a faraway land. "You feel it here too," Yoon says. "It just might be more muted."

When Yoon received the book from the Taiwanese literary agent Gray Tan, it immediately appealed to her. The topic was very much up her alley, but she was also excited about the cultural momentum propelling it. Korean culture "is suddenly very popular," she says. "People are even putting kimchee on french fries. When I was growing up, you did not want your friends coming over and opening your fridge!" But it's not just the cuisine: K-pop is booming, and Bong Joon Ho's thriller *Parasite* collected four Academy Awards last year, including best picture — the first foreign-language film to do so. And thanks to blockbuster authors like Stieg Larsson and Elena Ferrante, there's been a growing appetite for international literary translation. The English translation of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, by Jamie Chang, who teaches at a university in Seoul, came out in Canada earlier this year. The pandemic disrupted promotional plans, but, as Yoon says, "books have long lives."

For the novel's protagonist, the outlook is far less hopeful. On a stroll through a park with her daughter, Jiyoung overhears a group of strangers whispering about her: "I wish I could live off my husband's paycheck... bum around and get coffee... mum-roaches got it real cushy." She can endure this reality in silence for only so long. Then she falls apart.

Eventually, we learn that *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* is her patient file, an assessment of her dissociative disorder and depression brought to the reader by her male psychiatrist. The book ends with his comments about a female employee who's about to go on parental leave. He notes, with unnerving nonchalance, "I'll have to make sure her replacement is unmarried." ▲

Kaleidoscope

Lisa Robertson's first novel

Bardia Sinaee

The Baudelaire Fractal

Lisa Robertson

Coach House Books

208 pages, softcover and ebook

LIKE A CHILD WATCHING A MAGIC show, one opens a new book by Lisa Robertson with the delicious anticipation of being pleasantly deceived. So the news that the poet and essayist had published her first novel filled me with furtive excitement. *The Baudelaire Fractal* would be a novel, I figured, in the same way that Robertson's 2001 poetry book, *The Weather*, was about weather: elliptically, with a nervous, fluid energy.

In that collection, the author describes her purpose as "to advance into / the sense of the weather, the lesson of / the weather." What constitutes the *sense* of the weather? Take this passage from one of her extended prose poems:

The fresher breeze rustles the oak; our treachery is beautiful. Pop groups say love phonemes. We suddenly transform to the person. The hills fling down shadow; we fling down shadow. The horizon is awkward; we fling down shadow. The horizon melts away; this was the dictation. The ice cracks with a din; very frustrating.

If you're struggling to understand the meaning here, take my advice: Don't worry about it. Instead, consider the form, its jaggedness, the flickering coherence of images and half-rhymes (fresher breeze/treachery, dictation/frustrating). The poem moves forward in a contrapuntal nod, the sentences broken in two. Robertson's boundless tracts of text *are* weather: a movement of colours, moods, and textures coalescing and dispersing. The weather permeates our small talk and pop songs, our beliefs and apprehension of the future; we move through it as we move through architecture. These are not verses of bucolic reverie. The poetic line has been fractured, the horizon melts away.

In comparison, the writing in *The Baudelaire Fractal* is slower, geared toward detailed descriptions of mutable ideas and images. The sentences are baroquely layered, with nested clauses unfurling down the page like the folds of a satin gown:

Everything I was raised to be, all the docility instilled in me, the little punishments and constraints of girlhood, the intense violence and violations of adolescence, the roughly incised, undying shame of

female maturity and fungibility, everything about my past and my ordained place in the world, which I tried to escape by constructing an autonomous world within the shoddy, inadequate confines of my room, my diary, my knowledge, all these things continued to live in me in the form of grave spiritual contradiction.

My point here about Robertson's writing, which comprises eight poetry collections and several volumes of non-fiction, is that it very much expresses itself through its form, and its form is neither consistent nor conventional. (In the metatextual intemperance of having just finished a Robertson book, I can't help lingering on the fugitive echoes of that last adjective, its harbouring of *covenant, convent, coven.*)

I was surprised, therefore, to find that *The Baudelaire Fractal* does have some formal trappings of a novel. We have a narrator, Hazel Brown, and a premise: Hazel wakes up one day to find that she has authored the complete works of Charles Baudelaire.

While it makes for interesting back-cover copy, the Brown-as-Baudelaire angle is oversold.

"If you're struggling to understand the meaning, don't worry about it."


This is not like the 2019 Beatles-based parallel-universe film *Yesterday*; regrettably, our protagonist doesn't recite Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* to thousands of delighted, oblivious fans. Rather, Hazel, now a middle-aged poet in rural France (where Robertson herself lives), revisits her bohemian twenties in 1980s Paris, a time spent living in cramped *chambres de bonne*, making out beside water fountains, and marching her eccentric thrift-store outfits through the galleries and boulevards of the city Baudelaire called home. These events constitute the novel's action, of which there is not much.

Nor is there really a plot. The book progresses instead through a sort of purposeful meandering. In twenty-page sections that read like lyric essays, there are reflections on the stultifying and contradictory expectations placed on women, resulting in what Hazel calls the "implausibility of girlhood"; erudite and occasionally tiresome disquisitions about the "erotics" of everything from cities to furniture; and richly textured descriptions of rooms and any other surfaces that interest our narrator, a modern she-dandy in the mould of the book's namesake.

The book's scenes are not story developments so much as occasions for Hazel to examine her perceptual scaffolding. This narrative approach is both granular and sweeping in a way that is almost impossible to describe. One section begins with Hazel sipping beer and reading the *Times Literary Supplement* in a café. She's wearing a sharp new teal-green suit. She doesn't witness an incident, she isn't approached by an intriguing stranger, and yet, like a compelling picture, the still image transforms. The outfit and the magazine, Hazel tells us, are "fictional," meant to assist her "in an unnamed metamorphosis" to become "that other thing, which here I will call for the sake of brevity a poet." This fictional garment is a "mystic portal," one that she had tried to take to poetry, solitude being another, before she started writing it. In hindsight, she doesn't scorn herself as a poser; this artifice was a necessary part of her metamorphosis: "The distinction between inner and outer worlds was becoming permeable and supple, like a fabric." Dressing the part is a metaphysical assertion, as is the act of reading. The "gentle gestures" of her fingers along the book's spine, her foot moving slightly as she turns a page,

bring Hazel "to the quiet certitude of this body, my odd body, as an image for thinking, an image for my own free use."

Despite its sheen of bohemian idealism, Hazel's life is not entirely charmed. She is renting shabby rooms not out of aimlessness but as a refusal of the servitude and docility forced upon women. "A girl in her hotel is free," Hazel tells us, and "by free I mean that nothing is meant for her." Ironically, she finances her modest freedom by working for bourgeois Parisian families. To avoid domestic life, Hazel cooks, babysits, dusts, polishes, irons, and sews. Nevertheless, she does this on her terms, for her own benefit, and, to alleviate this fundamental contradiction, she half-asses most of the work.

By most standards, *The Baudelaire Fractal* is dripping with pretension. When Hazel attends a soirée at the grand apartment of a chic young graduate studying under the post-structuralist Julia Kristeva, I couldn't imagine a party I'd like to go to less. This is, after all, a book about appearances, about the joy, indispensability, and, yes, "erotics" of artifice. If long digressions about the history of tailoring don't suit you, you are free to read something else. (I for one was delighted to learn about the theory that "the lapel is a gentleman's expression of vulva-envy.") But know that there is a gorgeousness and freedom in this novel that you won't find elsewhere. 

Lean and Slender Forms

A haunting debut

Gayatri Kumar

Lightness

Fanie Demeule

Translated by Anita Anand

Linda Leith Publishing

84 pages, softcover and ebook

READING FANIE DEMEULE'S AIRTIGHT debut can feel a bit like watching a body-horror installation in a dark, windowless room. The narrator is struggling with an eating disorder that steadily consumes her; she's also practically the only character in the book. But that's not to say that it's an entirely unpleasant experience. *Lightness* is a spare, stylized, and beautiful exploration of a young woman's life-threatening obsession.

The novel was first published in 2016 under another haunting title, *Déterrer les os* (Unearth the bones). For a debut, it's a bold undertaking, one that shocks with form as well as content. Across its scant eighty-plus pages, paragraphs appear in small, bite-sized chunks—a teasing invitation to devour the text quickly. A relentless rhythm of clipped sentences drives an increasingly insular narrative. Demeule's protagonist remains distant throughout, so much so that we never learn her name. She tells her story with clinical detachment and with little hint of self-awareness, only a transfixing descent into self-loathing. "I find myself fatter than ever," she says. "I'm a fake at being skinny, another fucking wannabe. There's nothing convincing about me. I'm just a fucking joke."

It is a lonely tale, too. Secondary characters are notably absent and have only the faintest of contours. "My sister is making herself toast," the narrator tells us, but little more. Even within the work of novelists who explore the dark and painful, sometimes darkly funny subject of women's alienation—think Ottessa Moshfegh, Rachel Cusk, or Anakana Schofield—this degree of solipsism is unusual. *Lightness*, in Anita Anand's near-seamless translation, closes in on the reader, page after page.

The book opens abruptly with the narrator's birth. Premature, she weighs only four pounds but doesn't remain "a runt" for long, suckling incessantly until her mother switches her to a bottle. This is the beginning of her insatiable hunger. Later, on a family holiday, she gets her first taste of sexual pleasure atop a wooden pony on a carousel and turns into a "little addict," asking to go on the ride over and over again. ("My face is hot, insane with pain and pleasure.") When she discovers grapefruit, she eats it with what can only be described as carnal

relish. "From somewhere deep and guttural," she demands another.

Everything changes with the arrival of her period. The narrator wakes up in her "soiled" bed, and upon learning "the business about babies," declares that she wants out of the whole thing. Shame sets in, as well as a visceral dislike for the body's excesses. "All day I weep in anger and helplessness," she says, against her "cunning, vicious body," which she loathes and dreads: "This humiliating stranger. This diving bell in which I'm trapped, buried alive." Confused and overwhelmed, she makes it her goal to stop her period, which she hears can happen to athletes and gymnasts. Their lean and slender forms become, to her, disencumbered and perfect.

In pursuit of that titular lightness, the narrator attempts to sublimate her appetites, and a program of rigorous exercise and starvation ensues. She allows herself only frugal meals: one Quaker granola bar, a green salad, a clementine, a ladle of soup. She takes up the cello—a superbly suggestive instrument—and practises for hours every night, hoping to dislodge all traces of inaccuracy and excess. She exercises with admirable if frightening discipline, comparing her

"Her obsession mutates into something dangerous and all-consuming."

laps of the family's swimming pool to that first, ecstatic experience on the carousel. One excess is traded for another. She thinks she could go on this ride forever.

Eventually, her obsession mutates into something dangerous and all-consuming, a ritualistic devotion to bones and purity that Demeule renders in chilling, succinct prose. The narrator adopts an "excellent bone maintenance regimen" to care for her wasted frame: "I meticulously wash it, eliminate its impurities, sharpen its contours and its clean, minimal lines." She insists that her bones are "purity in linear form," and then, in an act of further purification, gives away all her possessions and paints her room white. As readers, we watch helplessly as she sinks deeper into delusion.

LIGHTNESS CAN BE A BLEAK TEXT, BUT DEMEULE'S narrator is a compelling anti-heroine. Melancholy, obsessive, and darkly funny, she presides over the text like some demented priestess—grandiose in her sense of self, consumed by her ritual devotion, and mercilessly cynical about pretty much everything else. She

goes on dates with men she has no interest in, seemingly only to mock them: "He parks like a cowboy. Then he comes around to open my door, presumably to score a few fuck points." On nights out, she refuses to pay, then yells at her friends with characteristic high-mindedness: "Let me live a life with no money, no alcohol, no food and no sex. I don't want to be like you." (In response, her friends lift her by the armpits and throw her into a taxi.) For her first college trip abroad, she chooses Ireland, "kingdom of hunger and strength," and, without a hint of irony, states that her famine gives her a unique connection to the land. In the next paragraph, like a seer divining omens, she sits alone on a cliff staring into the eyes of an injured goat until it finally dies. When she returns from Ireland, she is thinner than ever.

Probing the interplay between sex and agency, life and death, is another form of the novel's obsessiveness. Magnolias explode into blossom as the narrator reads Marguerite Duras; ghosts and corpses appear and reappear throughout the text; purification becomes a recurring concern; and her cello is brought out occasionally, each time representing a turn in her relationship with her sexuality. But Demeule doesn't seem interested in exploring the questions she raises; neither does she dwell on pathos or offer a redemptive narrative arc. Despite pointing to the body constantly, she actually says very little about it, or about the way it's culturally coded and disciplined. The narrator's self-loathing is an internal exploration.

The book, then, is more an aesthetic project than a moral one. Demeule's delicate and richly allusive prose evokes both the beauty and the terror of her protagonist's predicament, and it traps us, and her character, somewhere in between. Well into her eating disorder and rail thin, the narrator goes snowshoeing and marvels at how she hovers over the snow. The grandiosity of her self-description frequently contrasts with the reality of her declining health. She's strong, she tells us, like the sun, like the deer she sees on her walk. She then conjures an image of freedom so thrilling and ethereal that we give in to the beauty of it without question. "My silhouette glides over valleys and hills, squeezes between the branches and rocks. . . . Antlers grow through my tuque, and I can feel a coat of fur bristling on my back. My eyes pierce the polar night."

It is the imagery that makes *Lightness* such an enthralling read, even if the surrender to it can feel uncomfortable and claustrophobic at times. The narrator describes it best when she's on her way to the hospital, midway through the novel. "It would be almost pleasant if I weren't so scared."

Bricks without Straw

PAUL AUSTER LIKENS TRANSLATION TO shovelling coal. I think of it as more like laying bricks. With one small move at a time, you build a wall to bear a load of meaning. Oh, and it should somehow be exactly like another wall made from different materials for another climate by someone whose mental image of a wall is nothing like your own.

Translating literature involves one step more than, say, a government report does. Once your wall is level and plumb and structurally sound, you go back and add the ornaments and grace notes that madcap nineteenth-century masons always included. As we edit — and editing is writing is translation — we must step away from the text we're *reproducing* and listen instead to the one we are *writing*. The translator's voice will inevitably shine through, so why hide it? Why not find small nooks into which you can slip your favourite words? (I always make room for "purchase," as in "foothold," or "cleave to," as in "hold to with great conviction.")


In my early twenties, on a road trip from British Columbia, my girlfriend and I got lost in Quebec City's Lower Town. We ended up renting an apartment on the street where I still live. In my neighbourhood, I often watch master masons working with the unhurried assurance of craft mastered through experience. I aspire to such sureness of hand. But that is not the only lesson my neighbourhood has taught me.

I've walked Rue Saint-Vallier — a curved thoroughfare that defies the city's grid — between five and ten thousand times. Inhabiting a text until you can do it justice in translation is like walking the same street over years that become decades. You start out in awe and in love (young, clueless); over time you learn your way; before you know it, you can see not only each business but the ghosts of businesses past. You remember when that café moved in, the surprise when those architects set up shop. At some point, you find yourself holding your son's hand, seeing through his eyes. You imagine what the bent-over ladies see, the ones who knew this place when it was teeming in the '50s and then saw it empty out, one storefront at a time, until one day, as if overnight, people again packed the streets their grandparents had left behind.

I can't extricate my patient emigration to this city and appropriation of this language from the process of becoming a translator; they are one and the same. The people who gently laughed at me showed me how inadequate my school French was. Until you've bought lumber, talked to children, and eavesdropped on hundreds of buses, you can't really understand a language (or a place). After fifteen years, I still have to ask authors and friends to explain jokes and qualify the harshness of insults. But I have learned to recognize the contours of my ignorance.

My latest translation is Christiane Vadnais's *Fauna*, ten linked stories set against dire climate change and, yes, a pandemic. A biologist strives to understand a deadly parasite with such single-mindedness of purpose that she is loath to stop working even to give birth, which she does, in one of the book's most thrilling moments, alone in her lab. Vadnais's prose is elegant, formal. "Delatinizing" diction and syntax is often the backbone of French-to-English translation, but I found that this particular text, with its main character steeped in Linnaean biology, called for the opposite approach. I went full Samuel Johnson and embraced Latinate words and constructions.

On *Fauna's* final page we find this sentence: "Dans la forêt brumeuse, les chevreuils tendent l'oreille au son des chiens-loups qui ont oublié leurs jeux de balle d'autrefois pour en inventer d'autres, moins naïfs." (In the misty forest, the deer prick up their ears to catch the sounds of the wolfdogs who have left behind their ball games for more noxious entertainments.) I'm confident that "moins naïfs" has never before been rendered as "more noxious." But after trying twenty or thirty formulations, that was where I landed — on an obsolete yet recognizable word that somehow reflects the nocturnal menace of these creatures and the book as a whole. Then I hoped against hope to get "noxious" by my tough, unerring editor, and somehow did.

Literary translators aren't exactly craftspeople, nor are we quite authors. We must be unafraid to break rules, thorough enough to leave no stone unturned, modest enough to check our worst impulses, selfish enough to hone our voice. Like a street that defies the grid, translation follows its own path, one I'll spend a lifetime walking but never figure out. 

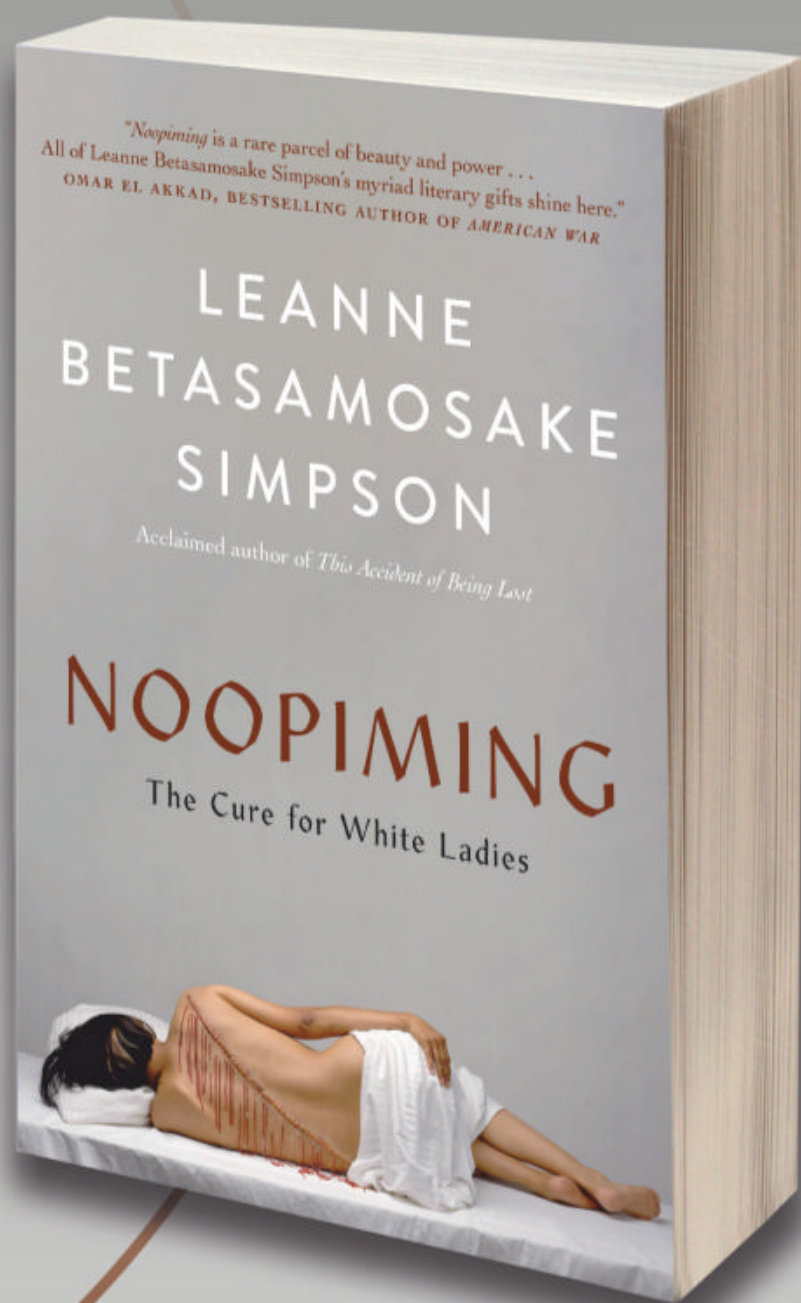
Pablo Strauss is the translator of Fauna.

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