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Literary Review of Canada

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Literary Review of Canada

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On the cover: "Out of Office," by ***David Parkins***.

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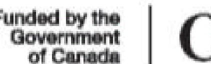
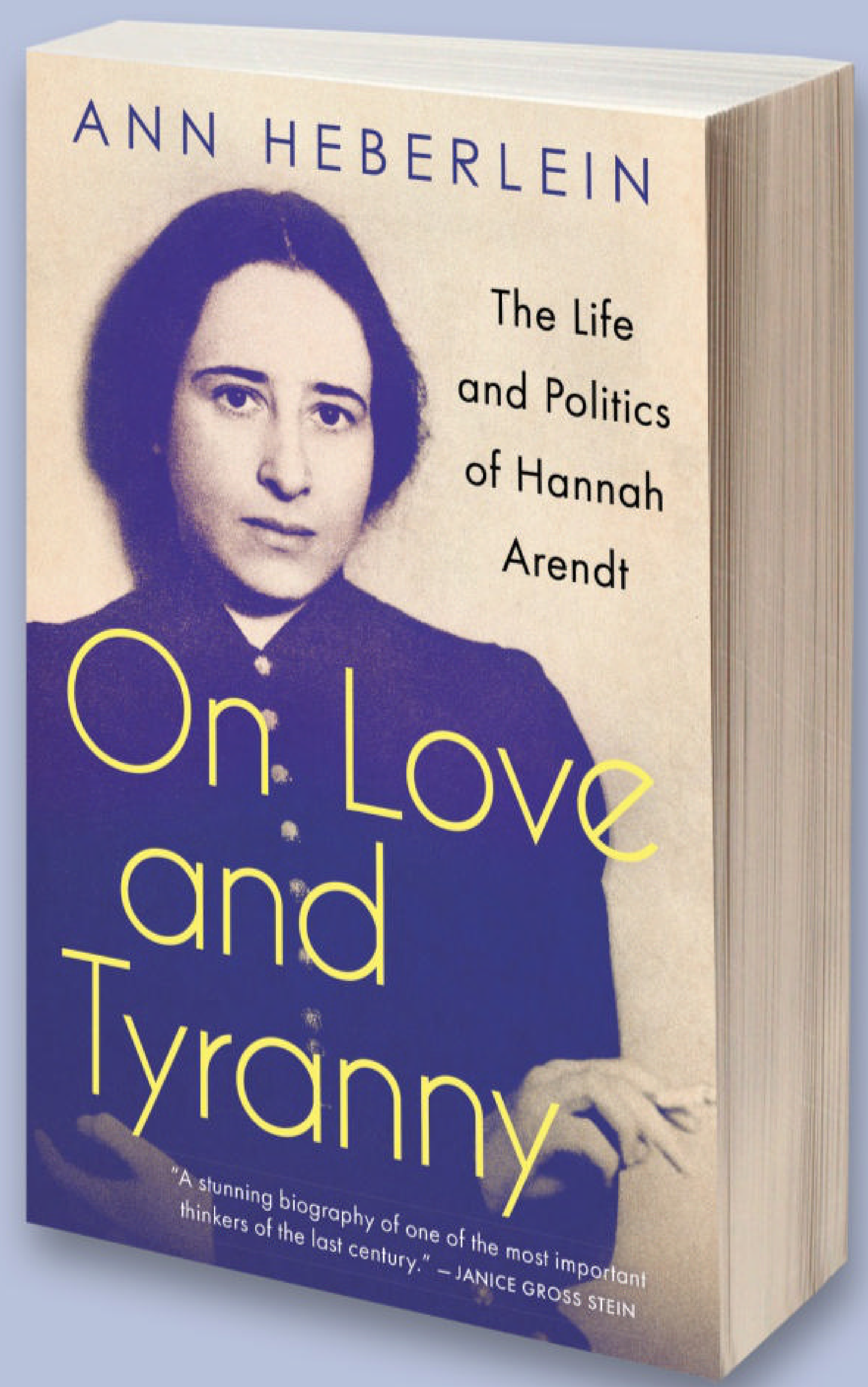


"THE TRUTH MUST BE TOLD, REGARDLESS OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF THAT TRUTH."

– HANNAH ARENDT (1906–1975)



"STUNNING."

– Janice Gross Stein, political scientist and founding director, Munk School of Global Affairs

A groundbreaking biography of Hannah Arendt, whose insights into the power of lies, the corruption of the human spirit, and the "banality of evil" are eerily and urgently relevant half a century later.

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A Pronounced Problem

The CBC, the BBC, and NPR are all part of my daily radio diet, but I tend to indulge in more lighthearted fare early in the mornings, especially if I'm about to head out for a hard run. Grinding through fast kilometre repeats is just easier with a pop song stuck in my head than with the reality of the latest newscast settling in (that can wait until I'm back at my desk).

My typical morning soundtrack is a highly rated Toronto station with three likeable hosts, who mix silly games and celebrity gossip with quick hits on the usual topics — the traffic, the weather, the latest COVID-19 numbers, and, of course, American politics. Last year, the presidential primaries and general election got plenty of airtime in between Top 40 hits, just as the MAGA marauders of January 6 and the swearing-in of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris did earlier this year. Canadian politics and politicians, meanwhile, tend to fly under the radar; who cares about Sean Casey or, for that matter, Justin Trudeau when you have Shawn Mendes and Justin Bieber.

But even my morning radio hosts couldn't ignore the sudden departure of Julie Payette, on January 21, as Canada's twenty-ninth governor general. The DJ who plays the role of the smart one briefed listeners on the unfolding drama the morning after the former astronaut aborted her mission: the allegations, the official statements, the high-profile lawyers who had been retained, even a cringeworthy refresher on what the governor general actually does. And seeing as this was palace intrigue at its most viceregal, she also mentioned the name of the GG's New Edinburgh palace several times.

What troubled me on my run the morning of January 22 was not the pace of the workout or the news of Payette's resignation, which had consumed me the night before. What troubled me was how the young broadcaster — fully educated in Ontario, according to my sources at LinkedIn — repeatedly pronounced Rideau Hall as "Rye Dough Hall," as if we were about to make a loaf of bread. It's a small thing, yes, but one that speaks to something larger.

One of the things about sleeping next to an elephant is just how loud pachyderms can be, with their constant rumbling and trumpeting and stomping. In the wild, their sounds can be heard from up to thirteen kilometres away. In metaphor, they can be heard across a closed international border — so clearly, in fact, that just about all of us can mimic them perfectly.

At this point, we would find it unforgivable for on-air talent, however serious or saccharine, whether in the U.S. or Canada, to mispronounce the first name of the new vice-president. At the very least, one host would try to subtly correct the other's mistake. But butchering a vowel in Rideau Hall, with thousands and thousands of early risers listening — that blunder goes uncorrected and, I worry, unnoticed by far too many.

Rideau Hall may be little more than a symbol, but it's our symbol, one that represents the apogee of our political and civic order. Its pronunciation matters because what goes on there matters, just as much as what goes on at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue or 10 Downing Street or any other stately address that captivates the collective imagination. Its neglect is sympomatic of a larger problem, a reminder that we must not allow urgent debates about the future of Canadian content — whether they're around the CBC's broadcasting licence, around social media companies compensating news organizations for content, around more publishers wanting to merge, or around the very survival of our newspaper and magazine industry — to be drowned out by the entertaining circus animal next door.

We all felt the emotional baggage of the presidency just past. We all felt the horror as rioters descended on the U.S. Capitol, as well as the relief of a successful inauguration two weeks later. I suspect we all feel some hope that the next four years will be far less exhausting than the past four, even those who are upset that Biden has cancelled Keystone XL. But, on the whole, do we feel anything so viscerally about the goings-on at Parliament Hill? Do we listen with the same rapt attention we give Washington?

For the time being, Donald Trump is holed up in Mar-a-Lago, an address that no Canadian radio personality would ever mispronounce. For the time being, a sense of decency has returned to the West Wing. We can't ignore the elephant — that would be naive and impossible — but maybe we can adjust the dial and spend more time talking about ourselves, about things like the new governor general and the new governor general's secretary — who those people are, how they are selected, and how their jobs affect all Canadians, no matter which part of our news ecosystem we turn to.

Kyle Wyatt, Editor-in-Chief

THIS SPRING,
WE'RE KEEPING
CONNECTED
EVEN AS WE MAINTAIN
OUR DISTANCE

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Furthermore

RE: ***The Colossus***
by J. L. Granatstein (January/February)

As I read J. L. Granatstein's review of *The Unexpected Louis St-Laurent*, I felt great sympathy for the former prime minister, who travelled the world on that "slow and noisy RCAF aircraft." I presume it was the military version of the North Star, which I flew from Dorval to Scotland in summer 1957. I found myself sitting next to a lady who, after a few pleasantries, asked me what I thought of the plane. I told her that I thought it ugly, noisy, and uncomfortable. "I christened it!" she replied, before introducing herself as Mrs. C. D. Howe. Things were a little cool for the rest of the twelve-hour flight!

Robert A. Stairs
Peterborough, Ontario

RE: ***For Your Reference***
by Michael McNichol (January/February)

As a retired librarian, I was pleased to see this piece. While pursuing my master of library and information science degree, I had a general introduction to the Canadian library scene, where people took pains to distinguish our approach from that of the United States, while recognizing how we were, essentially, all part of larger Anglo-American library traditions.

McNichol has raised two important points: First, the different ways we can view freedom of speech. I do not have a solution to the dilemma facing librarians. But libraries have dealt with this in many ways in the past; the tendency has been to safeguard their independence when making decisions about collections, services, and programs. Yet I am not sure who or which organization is actually qualified to make some of those decisions when it extends to inclusivity and freedom of expression. I wish I knew the answer!

Second, McNichol raises the issue of "cultural sovereignty." This echoes so much of what Canadian history reflects back to us: the challenges of being independent in the face of America's scale and influence. We are a nation of compromise, so the trope goes. Unfortunately, compromise gets bogged down when tough decisions need to be made. Canada is part of America's larger sphere of influence, and in many ways we speak its economic and cultural language. If that does not change enough (and I don't suggest it should change completely), we will never be able to have our own orbit.

I commiserate with McNichol, but I would love to know if he has any solutions to offer. Maybe we should work with our strength as a library community — a strength that rests on an intrinsic understanding of standards and networks. Libraries transcend boundaries. Maybe we need to seek a wider international view as opposed to a shorter-sighted national one? Maybe our American partners can now seek this option as well?

Lawrence Wardroper
Coe Hill, Ontario

Michael McNichol cites the Meghan Murphy affair when arguing that Canadian libraries should not provide platforms for groups whose messages "hurt others." I had to remind myself of the 2019 controversy with the Toronto Public Library. Although Murphy's positions may be incorrect — or "problematic," to use the current parlance — McNichol's dismissal of her is insufficiently demonstrated; his sounds like a playground admonition (define "hurt").

I'd like to see McNichol prove his point rather than simply point to a Twitter ban as sufficient reason to silence this person.

Antanas Sileika
Toronto

RE: ***Lives Less Ordinary***
by J. D. M. Stewart (January/February)

Never trash a book you have not read? Okay, but it sounds like *Extraordinary Canadians* meets my low expectations, with its shallowness, mediocre photos, and dodgy copy editing. How could something so bland spring forth from the chromed dome of Peter Mansbridge, who finally gets a chance to have his voice heard, the poor old white boomer?

But I am looking forward to picking up a copy of Jocelyn Létourneau's *La condition québécoise*, which Graham Fraser reviewed in the same issue. My house may be in La Belle Province, yet after two years I can claim only to be a Quebec taxpayer (and a confused one at that). More insight will be appreciated.

Finally, I'd like to commend the *Literary Review of Canada* for letters that are actually readable, which cannot always be said of Epistles to Lord Editors of many other periodicals. Here's to all your brilliant readers!

Joel Henderson
Gatineau, Quebec

RE: ***This Is Not the End of the Story***
by Ian Waddell (December 2020)

In his letter to the editor, in the January/February issue, Murray Angus writes that my recent article about section 35 of the Constitution is incomplete. He points out that I didn't mention the role of Peter Ittinuar, the first elected Inuk MP and my fellow NDP caucus member. Angus is correct to point out the oversight, for which I apologize. (A bit of old age may be at play, as I'm recalling events that happened almost forty years ago. But that's no excuse.)

Angus also mentions a private meeting that Peter had with Pierre Trudeau at 24 Sussex. I was not previously aware of that meeting and have never been inside the prime minister's official residence myself. Back in 1982, I was the NDP's energy critic, and the Trudeau government had just introduced the infamous National Energy Program: I was a pretty busy guy doing both the energy issues, with Peter Lougheed, Marc Lalonde, Ed Clark, and other heavyweights; and the Constitution issue, with Trudeau and Jean Chrétien. So many of my NDP colleagues, including Peter, were very involved themselves. This was one of the most intense times in Canadian parliamentary history.

Later in his letter, Angus wonders if I did not mention Peter because he jumped from the NDP to the Liberals. This is absolutely false. I'm not that type of person. Peter Ittinuar has been my friend since we first met in 1980, and I genuinely admire him and his contributions to Canada. Finally, Angus mentions that the constitutional story involves "more than the white guys who did it." I tried to note that very thing — that my own understanding had come from watching and living with First Nations throughout the Berger Inquiry, and that Indigenous people were so active and effective on Parliament Hill as we repatriated the Constitution.

We titled the article "This Is Not the End of the Story" because, as Angus rightly points out, there are countless other perspectives. I hope we can continue to hear from many different people who were and continue to be involved in the story of section 35 and other important moments of Canadian history.

Ian Waddell
Vancouver

The tale touches down in Nanaimo. Clifford White of Snuneymuxw First Nation and David Bob of Snaw-Naw-As First Nation argued in court their right to hunt deer in closed season under the James Douglas Treaties. And Jim Manly, whom Waddell mentions, also worked to ensure Aboriginal rights were included.

@FrankMurphy49
via Twitter

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Slouching toward Democracy

Where have all the wise men gone?

Marlo Alexandra Burks

Restoring Democracy in an Age of Populists & Pestilence
Jonathan Manthorpe
Cormorant Books
320 pages, softcover and ebook

In his flight from the Furies, Orestes — who has committed a vengeful matricide — prays to Apollo for refuge. His prayer is answered, and he is whisked away to Athens, where Athena asks the "men of Greece" to judge "the first trial of bloodshed." At her behest, the best citizens of the Attica peninsula come forward and place their pebbles into one of two urns. They vote.

Aeschylus tells this story in *The Eumenides*, the third play of his Oresteia trilogy. The Father of Tragedy grew up in the early period of Athenian democracy, as it was struggling to establish itself. His trilogy begins with *Agamemnon*, in darkness and suffering. But it ends with the light of wisdom and the establishment of political order and justice — and institutions to protect those things. It's a story of the birth of a hero: not Orestes, but Democracy itself. The Furies and the destructive chaos they bring to their victims are banished; wisdom and moderation prevail over rage and excess. This is how democracy functions, according to Aeschylus.

His is not the only vision or version of democracy, of course. Nor is the Rubik's Cube–like interaction between theatre, the courts, the people, and religion unique to ancient Athens. As the British archeologist David Wengrow and the late American anthropologist David Graeber pointed out in a recent *Lapham's Quarterly* essay, participatory forms of government were and are more common than many previously believed: Mesoamerica, Mesopotamia, Ukraine, and the Indus Valley have all at some point organized their political lives according to some form of democracy. Closer to home, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, of the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas, has long existed as a participatory democracy and likely influenced the United States Constitution that was ratified in June 1788: "Both models stress the importance of unity and peace and provide freedom to seek out one's success," the confederacy's website observes.

As rioters and insurrectionists stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6, the Christian calendar's Day of Epiphany, many wondered where all the wise men had gone. Would the Furies and chaos prevail after all? Enter Jonathan Manthorpe's *Restoring Democracy in an Age of Populists & Pestilence*, a self-proclaimed "fast gallop over heavy ground." This is the seasoned journalist's response to the flagrant threats to democracy witnessed not only in Washington but throughout the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. A "fast gallop" it is: in some 300 pages, Manthorpe covers vast geopolitical terrain, beginning with the end of the Cold War, in 1989, and racing toward today. It is an extraordinary feat of endurance journalism born from years of watching democratic facades crack, and made even more urgent by the threat of COVID-19, which he describes as a new "central player" in democracy's larger story. "The pandemic is a vivid reminder that a fundamental reason why humans created governments in the city states of Mesopotamia seven thousand years ago was for the protection and regulation of communal life. Among the essential responsibilities the authorities were expected to fulfil was maintenance of public health."

Amid darkness and suffering.

Andrew Caballero-Reynolds, The Peace Monument, January 6, 2021; AFP; Getty Images

Beyond the virus, what, Manthorpe asks, are the greatest threats to democracy? Increased inequality, for one: it's no surprise that Thatcherite capitalism and Reaganomics, like a bad hangover, are in large part responsible for the malaise afflicting people in nations around the world; there's less and less money to support them. Manthorpe looks to the International Monetary Fund to bolster his argument. According to a 2015 study on the causes and consequences of economic inequality, a country's GDP actually shrinks by 0.08 percent every time the income share of the rich (defined as the top 20 percent) rises by a single percentage point. Translation: "The effect of giving tax cuts to the already wealthy is the reverse of claims made by advocates of trickle-down economics and of the equally fatuous idea that 'a rising tide floats all boats.' A rising tide does nothing for boats that have holes or that have already sunk."

Governments that bailed out the banks during the 2008–09 global economic crisis only threw fuel on the fire (or water on the flood). While citizens suffered, a handful of predatory sociopaths were rewarded, and the average person was fed a lie. It's as if government no longer felt the need to protect and regulate communal life; this had become the purview of banks that are too big to fail. One former investment banker, Rainer Voss, put it well in Marc Bauder's documentary *Master of the Universe*, from 2013: "Je größer die Scheiße ist, desto dicker sind die Corporate-Social-Responsibility-Broschüren" (The deeper the shit, the thicker the brochures on corporate social responsibility).

The truly sad thing is that economic suffocation increases fear and fury. Growing economic disparity threatens communal life and leads to extremism — particularly of the right-wing, scapegoat-seeking variety — characterized by precisely those impulses that Athena once banished. And here we find another of the great threats to democracy: demagoguery. Manthorpe describes libertarianism and radical conservatism as "a snare and a delusion," but he's no more tolerant when it comes to "pure socialism." Unfortunately, Manthorpe doesn't exactly define "socialist," a term that circulates with frustrating vagueness. It's often used as a slur against Joe Biden, who's anything but a socialist, and most of the policies considered socialist today would have been bog-standard centrist positions in earlier decades. Nor does Manthorpe identify instances of recent left-wing extremist violence — and we'd be hard pressed to actually find any. That's because the bogeyman of the left-wing extremist isn't the threat: right-wing extremism is. The violence of January 6 will serve as a reminder of that. (I imagine I'm not the only one with Yeats's words on my mind: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.")

As for the political centre, Manthorpe doesn't see it holding: "Democracy's tragedy over the last thirty years is the erosion of the centre as political parties and establishment classes have, to one degree or another, lost touch with large segments of their societies." This trend tracks the disappearance of the middle class quite well. But the centre is experiencing more than just erosion: the entire political discourse has made a rightward shift. In other words, what once was

centrist is now leftist; and what once was leftist is somehow radical.

Manthorpe rightly worries about the middle class's alienation and susceptibility to deceit and disinformation — what he describes as a "running battle" that taps into our human "propensity for blaming unexpected events on unseen forces with dominant powers." At the heart of Manthorpe's book is a kind of Hegelian notion of freedom: People are free when they can identify with their institutions. That is, they can participate and see that those institutions, in some way, reflect their values. This engagement is based on trust and truth. If people are victims of deception, that identification is invalid.

Western democracy lives and dies by the integrity of its institutions and of those elected to serve them. One of *Restoring Democracy*'s most interesting discussions focuses on Canada, a country so often in the shadow of that shining beacon to our south. Drawing on *Democracy in Canada*, the recent book by the public administration scholar Donald J. Savoie, Manthorpe points to "defects that were built into Canada at its creation": namely, the adoption of Westminster-style institutions without regard for the geopolitical context into which they were imported. Federal-provincial relations, especially, are a recurring point of judicial contention, so much so that there is a growing perception that the Supreme Court of Canada, rather than Parliament, is the real seat of authority. The shrinking role of elected representatives, together with the media's celebritization and marketing of political leaders who are judged by their performance on screen rather than their platforms (if they have any), frustrates people still attempting to exercise their civic rights. Increasingly, we have to work harder to see past the smokescreens on our phones, computers, and televisions.

And it is tough to see through all the smoke, to say nothing of the Confederate flags that recently disgraced Capitol Hill, but Manthorpe has managed to spot a glimmer of hope. Oddly enough, it's a glimmer of hope that the pandemic has revealed: in these dark times, we have a true opportunity to confront ourselves, our institutions, and our shared vision of the future. What do we want society to look like? How do we ensure the protection and regulation of communal life? Manthorpe recommends a top-down approach, in the sense that governments and their institutions must (re-)earn the trust of the people. The economic victims of COVID-19 are "a ready-made audience for populists," yes, but they can also be an audience for a different kind of spectacle: "A good place to start would be to revive the status of Parliament and the legislatures as the stages on which issues of the day are debated and resolved."

Aeschylus ends his Oresteia trilogy with a spectacular transformation. The Furies become the Eumenides, or the Gracious Ones. Vengeance is superseded by grace, fear by wisdom. And the refrain "Cry, cry for death, but good win out in glory in the end" is transfigured into the celebratory "Cry, cry in triumph, carry on the dancing on and on!" Of course, there's a catch: The Athenians have voted in equal measure for and against pardoning Orestes. The struggle between vengeance and justice is at a stalemate, even in democracy. It takes the intercession of divine wisdom to bring the trial to its end, and Athena casts the final ballot. Let's hope she, or some other wise one, does the same for us.

Royal Descent

Rideau Hall is brought down to earth

Mark Lovewell

No one would call the governor general's job an easy one. Juggling the roles of figurehead, political arbiter, patron, and diplomat demands someone adept at ceremony, attuned to political nuance, and comfortable in the public eye: that's no straightforward combination. Is it any wonder the pool of potential candidates was kept so narrow for so long?

Since Confederation, Canada has had twenty-nine governors general. The first seventeen were British, all cut from the same aristocratic cloth. Today, those early representatives of the Crown might look like nothing more than colonial relics, but that view does them a disservice. Most were highly diligent, some even carving out lasting legacies. Lord Lorne, for example, was instrumental in establishing the National Gallery of Canada, in 1880, while John Buchan, 1st Baron Tweedsmuir, enthusiastically instituted the Governor General's Literary Awards in 1937. Still, by the time Vincent Massey came along in 1952, there was widespread relief that the position had finally passed into Canadian-born hands. Massey himself was the perfect transitional figure, in many ways indistinguishable from his predecessors and with all the gravitas the post requires. His immediate successor, Georges Vanier, evinced a similar dignity; a proud francophone, Vanier wore the supremely Anglocentric title with ease.

Not all who followed were as scintillating in their talents, and it is probably fair to say that by the time Roméo LeBlanc stepped down in 1999, citing health reasons, there was a consensus that it was time to move past battle-hardened political warhorses. The initial trio of a new generation — Adrienne Clarkson, Michaëlle Jean, and David Johnston — proved highly successful. Each put a unique stamp on the job, not just modernizing its day-to-day features but recapturing some of the lustre that had faded since the days of Massey and Vanier.

There was every indication that Julie Payette would follow suit when she was tapped in 2017. A relatively young and highly accomplished trailblazer, and perfectly bilingual to boot, she seemed to embody so many favourable twenty-first-century Canadian attributes, at least as seen through the prism of the Liberal government's "sunny ways." Of course, the result did not turn out to be quite so sunny, and for a humdrum reason: when it came to checking whether image matched reality, no one in the PMO had bothered to do the essential legwork. So we are left with today's inevitable round of recriminations. Thankfully, we also have an opportunity to reflect on how vice-regal appointments are — and could be — made.

It'd be more than a stretch to say the present process is perfect. Indeed, there is a basic conflict of interest in having a prime minister choose an official who might sit in judgment of his or her own political future (even if formally the PM only recommends a candidate to the Queen). This flaw is particularly relevant during minority governments, when a governor general's decision-making power can play a pivotal role.

One of the many recommended improvements, bandied about in some other Commonwealth countries, is to have the governor general voted in by the general electorate. But it seems unlikely this suggestion will ever gain much purchase here. Other possibilities include passing the decision along to Parliament itself, or even involving the 1,000-plus members of the Order of Canada. Again, neither of these suggestions has gained much support. Not only would the constitutional obstacles associated with such options be immense, but each is inherently risky. In the immortal words of Walter Bagehot, the nineteenth-century observer of the British monarchy, "Its mystery is its life. We must not let in daylight upon magic."

That leaves procedural tweaking, for which practical options do exist. The one receiving the most attention at the moment is the notion that Justin Trudeau should set aside whatever animus he feels toward Stephen Harper and reinstitute the perfectly sensible arrangements of his immediate predecessor. They involve constituting an arm's-length committee to be in charge of each vice-regal appointment, at both the federal and provincial levels, with the task of passing on the names of five fully vetted candidates for the prime minister's consideration. This process has much to recommend it: it incorporates outside expertise, allows for a modicum of confidentiality, and does not break with constitutional traditions. Still, its resurrection may not come to pass. The current government might resolve instead to selfishly guard its decision-making power, giving the prime minister full rein to meet broader political aims, especially at a time when racial inequity and the push for reconciliation loom large.

So where does this leave us? Alas, probably muddling along as before, with nothing more in the way of consolation than a few earnest promises from the praetorian guard around the prime minister that important lessons have been learned. We can only hope that those lessons really do stick — if for no other reason than to aid our thirtieth governor general. After all, this person is the one who will have to contend with the shambles Payette left in her wake. Canadians ought to offer a large measure of goodwill as the next holder of the office sets about this delicate but vital task.

Wait, Wait... Don't Tell Me

The pros and cons of disclosure

Krzysztof Pelc

Too Much Information: Understanding What You Don't Want to Know
Cass R. Sunstein
MIT Press
264 pages, hardcover, ebook, and audiobook

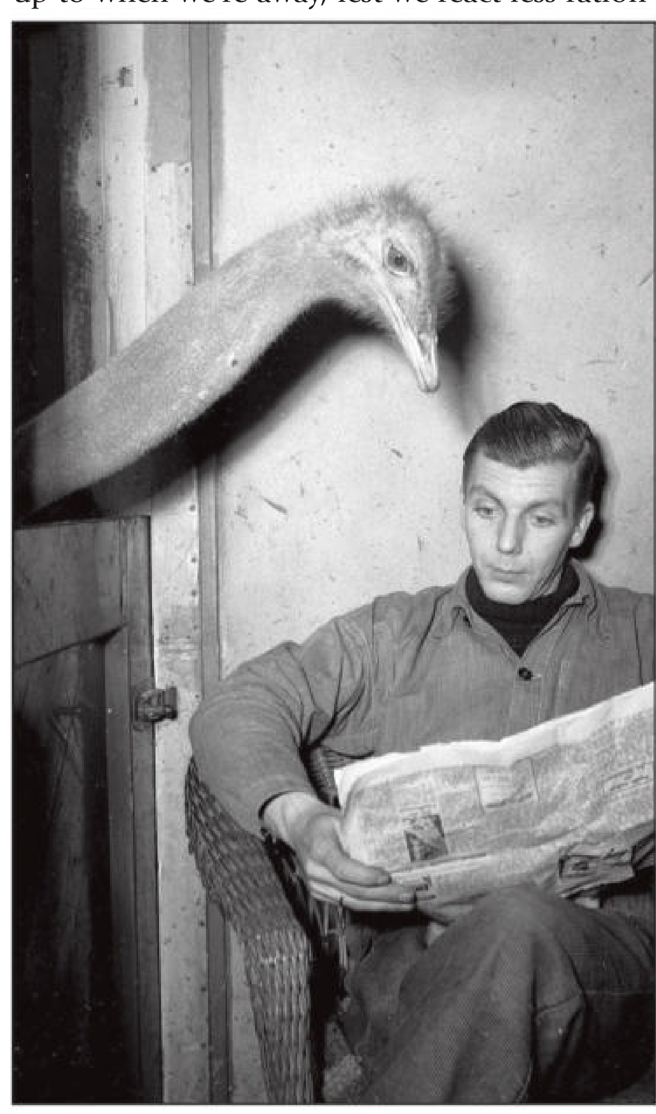
Aren't all the best myths really about the price of information? We have Adam and Eve ousted from Eden for wanting "the eyes of them both [to be] opened." There's poor Prometheus, who gets his liver pecked in perpetuity for disclosing the secret of fire and "all manner of arts" to humans. And there's Odysseus, beckoned by the Sirens' perilous revelation of "everything that happens on the fruitful earth." In each case, the moral of the story is the same: you don't want to know.

It has not stopped us from trying. In the post-Enlightenment era, the continuous acquisition of knowledge has become our prerogative. It's telling that the different versions of the Faustian myth — one more story about the price of information — fundamentally recast its hero following the Enlightenment. The sixteenth-century playwright Christopher Marlowe, for example, condemns Faust's hubris and rewards his megalomania with eternal damnation. By Goethe's time, in the early nineteenth century, Faust is redeemed. His defiant striving toward godlike knowledge is now bold rather than foolish. He is the original infovore, forever scrolling down and forever demanding, "More, please."

We accept the premise that rational decisions ought to be made on the basis of all available information, and that more of it is therefore better. People of reason prefer to know. They look reality in the eye. They read the full contract before signing it. If their spouse has been unfaithful, they'd like to be told, so that they can calmly choose the best course of action. If they have a predisposition to a degenerative illness, they want to find out, even if no treatment is available. They stay on top of the news, even when it's bad. In fact, isn't there something morally dubious about preferring not to know? We rarely sing the praises of the ostrich with its head in the sand.

Yet our high-minded celebration of maximal information often proves self-deluded. Despite our assurances that we can handle the truth, many of our actions suggest that we prefer not to. We constantly ignore information or attend to it selectively. People check their investment portfolios more often when the stock market is up than when it is down. They conveniently overlook the calorie counts on restaurant menus, especially if they are prone to indulging. Those who tend to overspend blind themselves to prices: they actually manage to not absorb the information, though on a subliminal level their minds know it's there.

In many cases, such a preference for not knowing is actually rational: it is the correct choice given the effect that learning something would have on us. The process of gathering information, for starters, can be long, costly, and tedious. A few years ago, researchers calculated that it would take us seventy-six days to read the privacy policies we agree to every year. Exposing ourselves to some truths can also make us sad or upset. Or it may worsen our behaviour. On further reflection, we may prefer not to know what our spouse is up to when we're away, lest we react less rationally than we'd hope. Knowing how the evening news makes us anxious and distressed, we might opt not to watch it. As I recently learned, parents-to-be must repeatedly choose how much they want to know — and when. There's the boy/girl question but also weightier ones, like deciding whether to test for Down's syndrome and a long list of other low-probability conditions, from sickle-cell anemia to Tay-Sachs disease. For weeks, I felt the full burden of the Enlightenment weighing on me. Reason can get us only so far in such cases, which is why the choices of reasonable people about which information to seek vary.



Whose head is in the sand now?

ANEFO/J. D. NOSKE, 1951; NATIONAAL ARCHIEF, THE HAGUE

As it has become easier to know — through the advent of Wikipedia and at-home DNA testing along with nutritional content listings, warning labels, and those forty-page disclaimers — it has also become easier to grasp that we may, in fact, prefer not to know.

This leaves governments — often the ones deciding whether we ought to be told something — in an unenviably tricky position. For the most part, the design of our political institutions has assumed an Enlightenment model of the citizen. They cater to our most rational selves, even when we happen to fall short of that standard. People claim they have "a right to know"; according to this mantra, they ought to be given *all* the information so they can decide for themselves.

The result has been a steady march among democracies toward ever greater disclosure. In 2005, Canada became the first country to make the labelling of all trans fats on prepackaged foods mandatory, to help consumers make better dietary choices. Two years later, Ottawa mandated that all prepackaged foods list their full nutritional content. Drug companies, insurance firms, car manufacturers, mortgage lenders, real estate agents — all are required to provide us with information that's meant to help us make better decisions.

There are even government-mandated disclosures about disclosures: online companies must now tell us what they will do with what we tell them about ourselves. Fewer than 3 percent of us bother to read those privacy policies, however. As a result, most of us draw the wrong inference from their existence: 75 percent of people think a privacy policy provides additional protection for their information, whereas it usually represents a relinquishing of it. Similarly, those who would gain most from reducing caloric intake are least likely to read nutritional tables. Given our false inferences and selective attention, are governments right in requiring firms to provide us with all this information?

The answer is all the more unclear given that it can be upsetting to know. When fast-food customers are told the amount of saturated fat in a meal they nonetheless want to order, they may feel they have been robbed of a pleasure. Smokers who are reminded of the health impact of a habit that they refuse to give up are likely to be aggrieved by the reminder. Should such emotive effects count when deciding what information to provide? Should governments care not only about how a disclosure makes us behave but also about how it makes us *feel*? Should they honour our whims, our biases, our foibles? Should they correct for these, like a concerned parent? Or instead accommodate them, like an understanding friend?

These are the questions at the core of *Too Much Information: Understanding What You Don't Want to Know*, by the Harvard legal scholar

Cass R. Sunstein. According to its main claim, governments should respect our quirky and distorted selves, those revealed through our sometimes incongruous behaviours, rather than the Enlightenment ideal of a rational citizen, which we rarely live up to. And, as the book's title suggests, that often means providing people with less, rather than more, information.

Sunstein may be as well placed as anyone to address the tangle of issues surrounding the question of which information to provide. He is the co-author of *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wellness, and Happiness*, from 2008, which was an attempt to apply lessons from behavioural science to government policy. That book was co-authored with Richard Thaler, a University of Chicago economist who was awarded the Nobel Prize, in 2017, for his research in behavioural economics.

The central idea of *Nudge* is that governments can guide people to better outcomes by redesigning how choices are presented while preserving the freedom to choose. Lives can be saved by changing the default option on organ donor forms, for example, since most people never deviate from the default. Children can be encouraged to eat healthier food if the vegetables are served at the beginning of the lunch counter rather than at the end. In the world of *Nudge*, small, harmless-sounding interventions can lead to better outcomes.

In 2009, Barack Obama named Sunstein his "regulation czar," which allowed him to test out some of his ideas in the real world. That appointment was seen in some quarters of the United States as a sinister takeover of government by paternalistic regulators who would rob Americans of their freedoms. Sunstein might have picked the wrong country to pitch his ideas in. Tellingly, behavioural insights have found a more welcome reception in policy communities outside the United States. The United Kingdom and Canada, in particular, have been leading the charge. Both the government of Ontario and the Canadian federal government have created "impact and innovation units" that prioritize behavioural insights of the kind that Sunstein has championed.

That stint in the policy world led Sunstein to revise some of his own beliefs about the right to know and the obligation to inform. One episode, in particular, seems to have precipitated a change of heart. In Washington, Sunstein successfully pushed for regulation mandating that all restaurants and movie theatres disclose the calorie content of all the food they serve. Learning this, a friend of Sunstein's sent him a three-word email: "Cass ruined popcorn." Standing accused of ruining a beloved puffed snack has caused Sunstein much grief, and it has provided the motivation for this latest book.

Sunstein proposes that information should be provided according to a simple rule — namely, whether it "would significantly improve people's lives." To his credit, he offers a disclosure of his own, admitting how that simple-sounding rule is "perhaps deceptively so." Indeed, what Sunstein proposes turns out to be a tall order: he suggests that regulators should fully take into account the behavioural and emotive effects of potential disclosures in deciding whether they would make people better off.

Assessing what "better off" means is the nub of the issue. One way of going about it is to simply ask people what they want to know. But here, too, people's quirks make this difficult. It turns out, for instance, that most people say they don't want to see calorie labels in restaurants, presumably because they want to enjoy their poutine without being reminded of its effects on their hearts. As consumers of cheese curds and fries well know, "he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" (Ecclesiastes 1:18). Yet the same individuals overwhelmingly favour regulation to force restaurants to disclose the calorie content of the food they serve. Sunstein calls this an "evident paradox," and he generally wants to place more weight than we currently do on how information makes people feel — rather than merely how it makes them behave. In other words, he regrets ruining popcorn.

In cases like these, Sunstein's attention to people's many irrationalities may lead him to underestimate the depth of their reason. If we want firms to list all their ingredients and their terms and conditions despite not wanting to read any of the details, that might be because we believe that if they *were* hiding something untoward, someone would alert us to it. This may reflect a faith in markets, another characteristic belief of the Enlightenment: we trust in the market's singular information-crunching powers, and we similarly trust that someone somewhere has a market incentive to flag harmful actions by firms.

> "We've seen a steady march among democracies toward ever greater disclosure."

Or else we may sense that we do not need to pay attention to the information ourselves, because the main effect of the disclosure is on the companies doing the disclosing. That effect is, in fact, supported by evidence: a survey of menus following a mandate to disclose calorie contents showed that restaurants shifted their offerings toward healthier options. This too, incidentally, is a product of Enlightenment ideas. Jeremy Bentham, the father of utilitarianism, dreamed of a model prison, which he called the panopticon: a design where a single guard could watch all inmates without their knowledge. The idea was that the mere possibility that they were being observed would improve their behaviour. Bentham's little design has gone down in history as an example of how technocrats' dreams can turn into nightmares. We may nonetheless have internalized its insight. We don't need to read the caloric warnings, as long as restaurants know that we could.

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WHEN SPENDTHRIFTS IGNORE PRICES OR GLUTTONS ignore calorie counts, it's easy to take the high-minded Enlightenment position: responsible people ought to know, so let's make sure that they do. But what about cases where self-deception might prove useful?

I face this dilemma myself whenever one of my students considers pursuing a PhD. A warning label might read: "About half of graduate students never obtain their doctorate, and only 10 to 25 percent of those who do end up with tenure-track jobs." How much should I insist on such a disclaimer?

What complicates matters is that while I believe in my duty to inform students of their chances, I also think that they might be better off ignoring me. Those who end up succeeding on the academic market often get there by paying no heed to the odds. This approach might actually prove strategic. We know from experiments in social psychology that self-deception of this sort can lead to greater persistence at difficult tasks and higher odds of success. For that matter, people more prone to self-deception appear happier in the present, and they have more positive expectations of their future. How much should governments be guided by such findings? Ultimately, I agree that self-deception can be useful; but I might prefer that it be up to individuals to deploy it. Which is why for calorie counts, as for the academic job market, I ultimately come down on the side of providing more, rather than less, information.

But things get trickier still. We know the precise cardiovascular implications of poutine and the odds of the academic market. But what if the costs and benefits of a disclosure are unclear? Since 2012, the United States has required that all publicly traded companies list any use of "conflict minerals" in their products. These include tin, tungsten, and tantalum — all found in a range of tech gadgets, from phones to laptops. These minerals often come from conflict zones, especially around the Great Lakes region of Africa, and the concern is that their mining may help fund violent rebel groups, increasing conflict and suffering. Canadian firms listed on American stock exchanges must follow the disclosure rule, but Canada has yet to adopt similar legislation, despite repeated attempts by some members of Parliament.

When the U.S. agency tasked with implementing the law tried to estimate its impact on conflict, it found it couldn't: the causal chain was simply too long. From a consumer's decision not to buy a product based on its sourcing, to a company's decision to change suppliers, to the impact that such a change in demand has on conflict on the ground — it became impossible to calculate what the final effect might be. In fact, it was suggested that the regulation might harm the very people it is aimed at protecting by depriving them of a livelihood. Such unintended consequences are what government regulators lose sleep over at night. But regulators are also in a better position than consumers to work through adverse effects. So should the information disclosure be required at all?

In this case, Sunstein does not come down clearly on one side or the other. Sticking with the idea that we should honour how information affects people's feelings, he suggests that the "warm glow" that some consumers get from choices based on moral convictions — such as not buying a product that contains conflict minerals — "should be counted" when making policy choices. But then he immediately adds that "agencies should do the best they can to determine whether disclosure will, in fact, counteract a moral wrong." He goes on, "There is a risk that morally motivated disclosure requirements will be merely expressive, producing a sense that something has been accomplished without actually helping anyone."

This strikes me as trying to have it both ways: governments should at once take into account the moral vindication that people get from seeing their beliefs validated by policy *and* stick to a policy's objective effects. Each sounds desirable, but they will often be incompatible. Either we value people's feelings and their moral beliefs, or we recognize that those feelings and beliefs are sometimes misguided and that it is the duty of government to parse the evidence with greater care.

The broader point is that information is not neutral if it is mandated. Citizens draw inferences from seeing their government require firms to disclose their use of conflict minerals. They reasonably conclude that consumption of such products must aggravate a moral wrong. The warm glow of moral vindication, in other words, is itself premised on governments doing their due diligence — rather than being guided by said glow. In cases like these, this deference to authority may be the best indication that people expect their public institutions to disregard the way information makes them feel, in favour of an objective assessment of the facts. Consumers can be led by whims, but governments probably shouldn't be — even when the whims in question are those of their citizens.

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IT IS THIS ISSUE OF TRUST THAT IS THE BIGGEST omission in *Too Much Information*. I don't know whether "ignorance is bliss," as Sunstein maintains is often the case, but it surely is a luxury. That's because one needs to know a great deal to know that one doesn't want to know. To choose whether to be told the calorie content of a cheeseburger, we effectively need to know the calorie content of a cheeseburger. In deciding whether to be informed of the genetically modified content of a tomato, it helps to have formed an opinion about the health consequences of GMOs. For this reason, choosing not to know often assumes that someone else does. It also assumes that this someone else can be trusted to know that we need *not* be told — either because it would be ineffective or because it would make us sad or upset.

As a result, it strikes me that Sunstein's change of heart about information disclosures represents a greater delegation of power to governments than his prior work on nudges. Indeed, the fundamental premise of *Nudge* is that the proposed policies preserve choice: I can still choose whether to be an organ donor; it's only the default that has changed. In this sense, it's the disclosures that are themselves a kind of nudge: I can attend to or ignore the information, but it is the government's way of nudging me away from a tech product that contains conflict minerals. It follows that refraining from that informational nudge may not, in fact, preserve choice. If I am not told which products are made using conflict minerals, or whether a tomato contains GMOs, then I cannot choose to be told in order to make an informed decision.

Another reason that less information may end up limiting choice is that information disclosures are often substitutes for hard rules. Rather than legislating, say, a total ban on trans fats (as several countries are contemplating), regulators can require that consumers be informed and leave it up to them to make up their minds. A preference for not inundating consumers thus makes it more likely that tougher policies like outright bans, which are explicitly designed to limit choice, will be put in place.

Of course, there is nothing intrinsically wrong in limiting people's choice. Forsaking choice is largely the point of advanced democratic societies. We let health authorities worry about tap-water quality so that we don't have to monitor it ourselves and decide whether to boil it every morning. If we had to be fully advised of all the safety features on an airplane before making an informed decision to take off, we would never end up boarding. We are constantly choosing not to choose, knowing that we do not know, and trusting that others do. Advanced market societies are based on such delegation of power, which does not take away from the fact that every time we consent to ignorance, we place a little bit more trust in policy makers' benevolence, as well as in their competence. To opt not to know, then, can be thought of as the privilege of those lucky citizens who believe policy makers' incentives are highly aligned with their own.

Yet the fact is that governments face conflicting pressures on information disclosure, something that Sunstein also leaves unaddressed. These pressures arise, first, because disclosures are expensive: meeting the American requirement on conflict minerals was estimated to cost companies $4 billion (U.S.) in the first year alone. As a result, industries often lobby against information disclosures. At least part of the reason Ottawa has not followed Washington's example on conflict minerals is the pressure by the Canadian mining sector, which regularly ranks among the most active special interest groups on Parliament Hill.

> "Our desire to be informed is starting to get in the way of our knowing."

More deviously, some corporations actually love information disclosures, precisely because of the high costs entailed. The biggest food manufacturers have thus been oddly favourable to rules mandating ever more detailed nutritional label requirements. That's because it plays to their competitive advantage: they can absorb the costs of analysis and relabelling, while small firms often cannot. Similarly, the largest firms can put out a new product overnight that is free of trans fats, MSG, or gluten, while mom-and-pop shops struggle.

Neutral-sounding disclosures are not neutral if they benefit large firms at the expense of smaller ones. Such competitive effects explain why governments are sometimes so keen not only to mandate those disclosures but also to impose them on their trading partners. In an era of low trade barriers, labelling requirements can be deployed as a substitute: it's often easier for a country's own producers to meet complex national requirements than it is for foreign producers.

In a landmark international dispute that concluded in 2015, Canada challenged a law that required that beef sold in the United States bear a label informing consumers exactly where the cattle were born, raised, and slaughtered. Canada claimed that the measure was disguised American protectionism and more trade restrictive than necessary. The World Trade Organization ruled in Canada's favour. The legal concept at issue is "country of origin labelling," which trade lawyers refer to by its acronym, COOL (though it is anything but). Think of it as the weaponization of paperwork. When domestic producers have an easier time clearing regulatory hurdles, they often insist that those hurdles be made into a requirement for others. The result is excessive paperwork and red tape — something that the economist Richard Thaler, Sunstein's *Nudge* co-author, calls "sludge." And while sludge is often portrayed as the result of bureaucratic overzealousness, it is just as often the result of clever corporate manoeuvring.

When people delegate power over information to governments, they do so trusting that policy makers will steer through these competing pressures and appropriately balance people's well-being with corporate interests. This belief places tremendous weight on one's faith in government, which may explain why countries other than the United States have shown the most interest in Sunstein's ideas. International surveys suggest that places like South Korea, which enjoys very high levels of trust in government, are most open to the idea. Countries like Hungary, where citizens have greater mistrust toward the government, are most strongly opposed.

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IN THE PAST YEAR, THE CONNECTION between information and trust has gone from an academic question to an item of dinnertime conversation. The management of COVID-19 has turned in large measure on what information — and how much of it — to broadcast in the face of rising death tolls, scientific uncertainty, and varying levels of popular denial and complacency. Early on in the pandemic, some governments suppressed information to limit public panic. In some cases, data on questions like the effectiveness of masks appears to have been misrepresented to stave off hoarding, in an effort to retain enough personal protective equipment for front-line workers. As a result, the credibility of government-provided information has been a key concern. Not coincidentally, those same countries that feature high levels of confidence in government have also proven best at tackling the virus. The pattern seems to hold even within countries, as the case of Canada suggests. Quebec and Alberta feature this country's lowest levels of trust in government; they have often seen the worst per capita numbers in the most recent wave of the virus.

Policy makers have been drawing on behavioural insights at every stage of the pandemic response. Survey experiments have been used to design public signs about handwashing that yield the optimal behavioural outcome, for example. In support of Sunstein's contention of "too much information," it seems that if these signs include too many steps, people retain less rather than more of their content. *Nudge* principles have been used to recruit volunteers for vaccine trials. And behavioural science may have the most to offer in getting those parts of the population that remain skeptical of vaccines to nonetheless get inoculated, and to return for that second jab.

The global vaccine rollout began, of course, just as many countries were seeing record-high rates of infection. In response, some health experts called for governments to disseminate even more information, with the explicit intent of scaring people, along the lines of public service ads against smoking. This tactic too draws on a well-established behavioural finding: namely, that people are more swayed by personal stories than by abstract numbers. The ubiquitous exponential curve on the front page of newspapers is one thing; graphic images of patients on ICU ventilators are another. The point of using fear would be to upset people for their own good.

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In arguing the merits of information disclosures, Sunstein draws on the most recent findings in behavioural science research. Yet the irony is that, cutting-edge though it may be, behavioural science often finds itself playing catch-up with the market. Advertising departments have long been acting on the very insights that social psychologists and economists are busy demonstrating through fancy lab experiments.

By pushing governments to take into account how information makes people feel, Sunstein thus finds himself arguing that policy makers ought to think more like marketers. Their objectives may differ, but the approach would be the same: to anticipate people's irrationality, their biased self-image, and their weaknesses, and to exploit them — either to move product or "to improve people's lives." In fact, Sunstein assesses whether people actually want to be informed of something based on their willingness to pay for it (a criterion that he also duly criticizes, but without providing a better alternative). It thus turns out that people would pay an average of $154 to know the year of their death (while others would pay not to know it) and $109 to know whether tech products contain conflict minerals. Of course, this willingness to pay is the very criterion that drives marketers. If people want to know, it means someone in the market has an incentive to tell them.

Seeing what such incentives have wrought in the market, however, underscores the limits of Sunstein's simple-sounding rule. In their never-ending bid to please consumers, markets are constantly creating novel grounds on which to do so: they invent desires so that these might be satiated; they come up with fears so that these might be dispelled. I still don't exactly know what bisphenol A is, but, seeing the proliferation of "BPA-free plastic" labels, I know I'd rather not have any of it in my newborn daughter's toys. Similarly, the preponderance of scientific evidence indicates that genetically modified foods have no adverse effect on human health, which is why the Canadian government requires no disclosure of GMO content. Yet this does not stop advertisers from eagerly promoting their foods as GMO-free. It is one more way for brands to differentiate themselves. That then shapes people's perception of what's safe and what's not, which in turn increases the perceived value of those labels. Marketing executives everywhere rejoice.

The conclusion the market has drawn is that affluent consumers want ever more information, and they are willing to pay dearly for it. And the market has delivered. The result is that our desire to be informed is starting to get in the way of our knowing. An average can of tuna, for example, is now adorned with a tapestry of labels and logos, each assuring consumers of the utmost virtue of its contents: its performance on matters of ethics, environmental protection, sustainability, carbon neutrality, organic standards. In Canada, there are over thirty officially recognized eco-labels for canned tuna alone. There's a case to be made that as a result, we are now less able to make educated decisions than we were when we had less information in the supermarket aisle. In fact, in ways that I suspect Sunstein would be sympathetic to, here is a natural role for regulators to play. When the deluge of information gets in the way of people making better decisions, regulators may want to start imposing limits on how much information consumers face when choosing which can of fish to purchase.

Consumers have not sat idly by, mind you. By now, we have exquisitely honed defence mechanisms against the market's exploitation of our weaknesses. We are terribly savvy consumers: we know better than to take those labels at face value. We instantly picture the focus groups over at Seafood, Inc. being used to measure our willingness to pay premium for tuna-can virtue. And we adjust our behaviour accordingly.

One risk of prodding governments to think like marketers — to encourage them to push our buttons "to significantly improve our lives" — is that we may develop analogous defence mechanisms against mandated information, even when it's information we truly need.

In the Soviet-era Poland where my parents grew up, a common joke was that whenever the weather forecast called for sunshine, it was best to pack an umbrella. Announcements of record economic output left people worrying about what bad thing the regime might be trying to conceal. The one human bias that Sunstein leaves out of his probing discussion is a universal and deeply ingrained distaste for being manipulated — even when it is for our own good. The use of behavioural insights by policy makers relies on considerable trust, but it also risks eroding that trust if it is deployed too eagerly.

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I remain highly sympathetic to the use of behavioural insights in policy making — which Sunstein's work has contributed to — and especially the evidence-based methods it relies on, like randomized control trials. Then again, I'm rather biased. These are the methods I use in my own research, now suddenly being adopted by policy makers. And everyone likes to see their work finally get some recognition, don't they?

Still, I remain uneasy about Sunstein's claim in *Too Much Information* that regulators should take into account how information makes people feel in deciding whether to provide it. The simple-sounding rule that people ought to be informed only if it makes their lives significantly better implies a degree of omniscience that may be beyond anyone's powers. And it leaves out how people's behaviour may adapt in turn. It seems to me safer to lean toward the Enlightenment model of the citizen — faulty though it may be — and disregard our feelings altogether. People are indeed prone to quirks, biases, and self-deception. But perhaps individuals ought to be the ones wrestling with these as best they can, rather than being protected from them by benevolent regulators.

Information does come at a price. And its disclosure is rarely neutral, especially when governments are the ones mandating it. Ultimately, popcorn may best be ruined.

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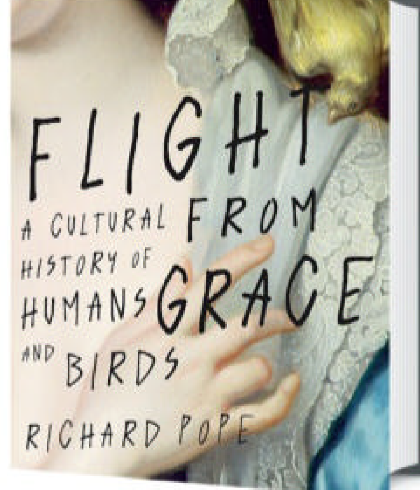

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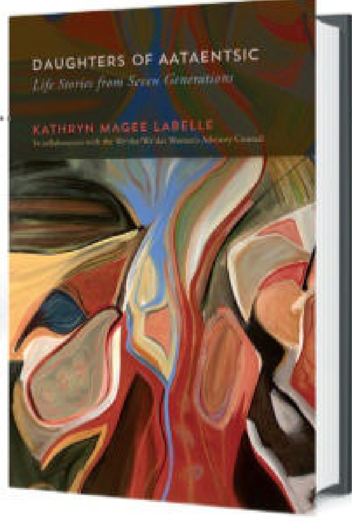

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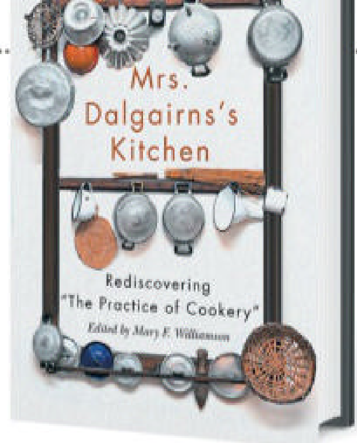

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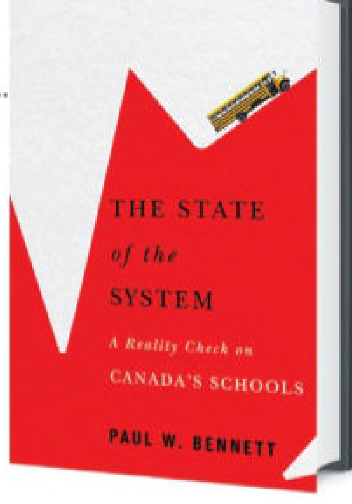

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496 pages, hardcover, softcover, and ebook

If the prospect of discussing Canada's equalization scheme sends you into narcoleptic despair, consider the bright enthusiasm of Lyndhurst Falkiner Giblin, who, on a warm day in August 1938, eagerly sauntered into a room on Parliament Hill to talk about the nitty-gritty. The sixty-five-year-old Australian economist wasn't put off by the dry-as-dust topic; indeed, he had sailed across the Atlantic from England solely to testify before the Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations.

Giblin arrived wearing a homemade red flannel tie with his blue shirt, a collarless suit, and workboots smeared with dubbin, but nothing showed his eccentricity as clearly as his eagerness to discuss the complexities of federal governments. He was in his element that sultry day, surrounded by people who were energized by the task of making federations more equitable, to allow poor New Brunswick to operate in the same league as rich Ontario. And the four commissioners listened with fascination as he outlined the formula that Australia had come up with five years earlier, so that all of its citizens had equal access to social programs, no matter where they lived.

Some level of equal access had been Ottawa's goal for decades, as it tried to balance the poorer and richer provinces with a variety of ad hoc loans and grants to deal with the inequality at the core of Confederation. Giblin showed what could be done in a more systematic way, but officials hooked on the practices of an overbearing central government weren't ready to follow. It wasn't until 1957 that Ottawa sent cheques totalling $139 million to eight qualifying provinces, so that they could finance the social programs that Canadians were demanding.

This bumpy road to equalization is the subject of Mary Janigan's *The Art of Sharing*, and it is not damning with faint praise to say that the book is vastly more interesting than the arcane subject matter at hand. Janigan rightly praises the equalization scheme as "the improbable glue that holds the nation together," even as its sticky charms are well hidden beneath a mountain of obfuscating numbers.

Journalists like to call equalization a MEGO story — as in "My eyes glaze over." Polls show that the scheme in place since 1957 is popular, but those who can explain how it works are few and far between. Fifteen years ago, as a reporter trying to get up to speed on the topic, I consulted a Queen's University professor. At one point, I stopped his briefing to say I didn't quite follow something. "That's okay," he said. "Only a few dozen people understand this, and even they don't always agree with each other."

But we can agree on this: *The Art of Sharing* is a book we didn't know we needed. Janigan uses deep scholarly research — her bibliography is twenty pages long and includes abundant archival material — to illuminate in a readable way the decades-long grudge match between the richer and poorer provinces, with a series of federal governments acting as hesitant referees.

In the postwar period, voters wanted better social programs, even as most provincial governments didn't have the revenue to provide both good roads and improved health services. The richer provinces — we have come to call them the haves — had the money, but their premiers fiercely resisted any transfers to their poor relations. The have-not jurisdictions, meanwhile, struggled with limited tax revenues.

Eventually, a full-court press by academics and bureaucrats persuaded the moneyed premiers that provincial inequality threatened to destroy the federation and that giving the others a leg up would increase general prosperity. The difficulty was in figuring out how to do it, especially as Ottawa had historically been reluctant to decentralize tax collection.

> "We can agree on this: *The Art of Sharing* is a book we didn't know we needed."

The federal government couldn't butt into areas of provincial jurisdiction, such as health care, so it eventually settled on the rather simple idea of giving money to some provinces to ensure they could provide relatively equal levels of services for relatively equal levels of taxation. The feds used the Australian experience to devise what Janigan calls a "rather nightmarish formula" that tops up revenues according to a province's fiscal capacity. There are no application forms and no conditions on how the recipients use the money. (The three territories have a similar and equally arcane scheme, Territorial Formula Financing, that in 2020–21 will disburse about $4 billion, unconditionally.)

Equalization is not a beloved social program like medicare or a lifesaver such as the federal transfer payments for post-secondary education. "It does not inspire fierce patriotism," Janigan writes. "It is not flashy." Yet it's no stretch to say that this untidy solution has kept this improbable country together.

The mix of have and have-not provinces has varied over the years as Saskatchewan, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Alberta have seen surges of resource revenue (and, truth be told, politics has come into play). The "nightmarish" formula has received a couple of makeovers, but there has been one constant: Quebec has always been a recipient. In 2020–21, Ottawa will pay out $20.5 billion to the have-nots, of which Quebec will receive $13.25 billion. Ontario, which was deprived of the benefit in 1978 by a last-minute change in the formula, received payments for a decade from 2009, but now it joins four other provinces that will wait in vain for money. Alberta hasn't seen any since 1963.

There are critics of the scheme, of course. This isn't surprising, considering that equalization sets up a primal battle over cash. When he was premier of Ontario, Dalton McGuinty raised a protracted fuss about his taxpayers sending $23 billion more in revenues to federal coffers each year than they were receiving in services. Reports were commissioned — one said that equalization had "drifted from its moorings" — and Ottawa fiddled a bit with the formula. And then the fuss died down once Ontario became a have-not province.

These days, Jason Kenney is the dominant naysayer. He is promising a referendum this year to allow Albertans a chance to vent their anger about a scheme that has given them a mere $92 million over sixty-three years (compared with Quebec's $198 billion). Other critics wonder whether the system has fostered dependency among the have-nots. Would the Maritime provinces have so many hospitals and universities without the billions they get? Could Quebec afford its comprehensive child care program? Did New Brunswick reject the tax revenue — and controversy — it would have got from fracking because it was simply easier to accept money from Ottawa?

Despite its somewhat Byzantine nature, equalization is "a principle that should be cherished." But to what extent does it actually work? While billions of dollars have flowed, there's never been a comprehensive study of the scheme's effectiveness. Does it actually ensure comparable social programs across Canada? Does it help have-nots boost their fiscal capacities? Does it foster national unity? The questions need answering, if only to cut down on the sporadic outbursts of resentfulness among the haves. Perhaps the greatest value of *The Art of Sharing* is to show us that it would be worth finding those answers.

Wild Rose Diplomacy

Negotiating Alberta's uncertain future

Bruce Campbell

Moment of Truth:
How to Think about Alberta's Future
Edited by Jack M. Mintz, Tom Flanagan, and Ted Morton
Sutherland House
320 pages, softcover and ebook

PETE RYAN

Tapping into some inconvenient truths.

This collection of thirteen chapters provides a window into the conservative brain trust that is helping Alberta navigate its relationship with the rest of Canada. Two of the three editors, Tom Flanagan and Ted Morton, along with Stephen Harper, were signatories to the five-point "firewall" letter, published in January 2001, that urged Premier Ralph Klein to seek greater autonomy for the province. Twenty years on, the current volume can be read as a fleshed-out version 2.0 of that missive.

As these contributors would have it, Alberta's attempts to reach a better deal within Canada — captured by the phrase "The West wants in"— have failed. The province is worse off now than it was four decades ago, and it is time to seek a more independent relationship with the rest of the country; if that is not successful, Alberta should set in motion the formal secession process. Many of these writers are the same neo-liberal policy advocates who have shaped the agenda of the current government under Jason Kenney. Preston Manning, for example, chaired the Fair Deal Panel, which released its twenty-five recommendations in June 2020, and Jack M. Mintz, a co-editor, chaired the Economic Recovery Council, which provided advice for recuperation from the pandemic.

Manning's opening chapter sets the tone for those that follow: Alberta is overtaxed and underrepresented in Ottawa. While it has transferred huge chunks of money over the past five decades to the rest of Canada, it lacks an adequate voice in Parliament, the courts, the public service, and other decision-making bodies. At the same time, it has been denied critical infrastructure for distributing its oil and gas. The so-called Laurentian elite (from Quebec and Ontario) has consistently thwarted Alberta, leaving it three options: stay with Canada but in a new economic relationship that recognizes the province's distinctiveness and the foundational role of natural resources; go it alone as an independent country; or join the United States.

Mintz titles his chapter "Why Do Small Regions Secede from a Federation (Sometimes)?" He considers several "cases of federal conflict," including Australia/Western Australia, Malaysia/Singapore, Norway/Sweden, and Spain/Catalonia. He draws five "lessons learned" from this overview: a wealthier region with limited political power must be protected from the national majority; fiscal transfers to poorer regions cause tensions if the richer region feels exploited; weak central institutions make devolution or separation more tenable; the lack of strong economic linkages leads to greater tensions; and separation can be peaceful if both parties are in agreement.

Elsewhere, the economist Robert Mansell analyzes the fiscal imbalances between Alberta and the rest of Canada from 1961 to 2018. The "substantial transfers from Alberta" during this time — $3,700 per person on average, and over $5,000 per person in most years after 1980 — "would appear to constitute the largest interregional transfer in Canadian history." Later, the economists Herb Emery and Kent Fellows consider those fiscal transfers and the value of interprovincial trade; they conclude that Canada has much more to lose than Alberta does if the province separates.

In his chapter, "Secession and Constitution in Alberta," Richard Albert, who teaches law at the University of Texas, outlines six steps to possibly leaving Canada: initiating the process, in which the Alberta government outlines its plans for a referendum; evaluating the question under the federal Clarity Act; voting, while ensuring the process is seen as independent, fair, and reflective of the will of Albertans; studying the outcome, including the size of a majority and the rate of voter turnout; negotiating terms with Ottawa, through what's known as the 7/50 procedure; and constitutional amendment.

In "The Future of the Resource Sector," the former energy executive Kelly Ogle argues that since Canada accounts for such a tiny portion of global petroleum production, aggressive reduction of oil sands activity would have negligible effects on climate change while damaging Alberta's economy. The political scientist Barry Cooper, perhaps the most extreme voice in *Moment of Truth*, argues in "Challenges for Western Independence" that the deck is stacked: no legal path to an independent Alberta actually exists, so aggressive action may be required, perhaps even U.S. military assistance. "From the oil sands as a strategic North American petroleum reserve to the use of the third largest air base in the world at Cold Lake, Alberta," he observes, "westerners certainly have military bargaining chips to offer the Americans."

The University of Moncton's Donald J. Savoie is something of a sympathetic eastern outlier in the collection. While reviewing the historical domination of Ontario and Quebec, he calls for national institutions — from Parliament and cabinet to the public service and the judiciary — to better represent regional economic interests. An example is Jim Carr's recent appointment to cabinet as Justin Trudeau's special representative for the Prairies. Such accommodation could forestall growing alienation in both the West and the East. Savoie writes,

> Change can only come from two sources: from central Canadians who are able to see that Canada can only develop to

its full economic potential if national institutions can better accommodate regional economic circumstances, and from Western and Atlantic Canadians joining forces to ensure that the country's national institutions incorporate strong intrastate federalism requirements.

By and large, the authors here reject the federal government's climate change policies, including emissions targets under the Paris Agreement, the carbon tax, Bill C-69 (which they say blocks pipeline construction), and Bill C-48 (which prohibits tanker traffic off the northern coast of British Columbia). In ways that echo the aftermath of Pierre Trudeau's infamous National Energy Program, these policies have led to the exit of foreign-owned energy giants from the oil sands (Total and Shell), while at least fifteen other companies have shifted their investments outside of Canada since 2014.

In the final chapter, the three co-editors summarize what's needed to undo the damage: a northern corridor for oil and gas pipelines; changes to the Supreme Court, including its composition, size, and how justices are appointed; an elected Senate; and provincial substitutes for many federal programs, including the Canada Pension Plan and the RCMP. Edmonton should also collect provincial income tax directly, exit federal cost-sharing programs, leave supply management for dairy and poultry products, and facilitate private health care. Then, following a referendum on equalization that's slated for this fall, negotiations should be shaped by "autonomism," by which the threat of separation could enhance Alberta's position within Canada. "The autonomist option could be helpful preparation for some version of separatism if Alberta is forced to move in that direction," the co-editors write. "In general, the more autonomous Alberta becomes, the easier it will be to contemplate full-fledged separation."

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ON THE WHOLE, CONTRIBUTORS TO *MOMENT OF Truth* largely ignore or downplay realities that inhibit or contradict their agenda. First, consider equalization. Back in July 2020, as the book was nearing publication, the University of Calgary economist Trevor Tombe pointed out in a CBC column that Alberta was on track to become a have-not province for the first time in fifty-five years, thanks to the pandemic and the accompanying economic crisis (this conclusion was based on a report he co-authored with Robert Mansell and Mukesh Khanal). Traditionally, high average incomes and a young population have meant that higher income and consumption taxes flow from Alberta, which Ottawa then uses to offset lower revenues associated with more elderly populations elsewhere in Canada. But there's nothing nefarious about this. "Federations allow us to pool risks," Tombe wrote. "When a province's economy is strong and its incomes are high, it will naturally contribute more than other provinces."

Second, a major swath of the Alberta electorate — mainly from urban communities — does not support the direction advocated by these authors. According to multiple polls, support for Kenney's United Conservative Party has plummeted since the May 2019 election. Other surveys have shown lukewarm support for separation, for scrapping the CPP, and for replacing the RCMP with a provincial police force.

> "*Moment of Truth* simply sets a number of inconvenient truths aside."

Most critically, *Moment of Truth* largely sidesteps the climate crisis, through either old-style denialism or what the researcher Seth Klein calls the "new climate denialism": saying one accepts climate scientists' warnings while avoiding their public policy implications. As a whole, these authors seem willfully blind to the stark reality around the corner, as well as to what's already occurring before their eyes: the loss of wildlife and Arctic ice, unprecedented natural disasters, even shifts in energy consumption. In 2019, the International Energy Agency forecast a future in which oil "demand growth is robust to 2025" but slows to a "crawl" after that. The intergovernmental organization anticipates demand for crude will fall from 97 million barrels per day in 2018 to just over 65 million barrels per day in 2040. High-cost Alberta bitumen would struggle more and more as global demand wanes.

Numerous global banks and investment funds, including Deutsche Bank, HSBC, and BlackRock, the world's largest asset manager, are stepping away from Alberta's oil sands. And any comfort Donald Trump's administration may have offered the Kenney government has been quashed by Joe Biden, who has rejoined the Paris Agreement and cancelled Keystone XL.

Moment of Truth might have suggested ways the provincial government could assume a leadership role rather than reflexively continuing down dinosaur row. It might have proposed how Canada's five biggest oil companies — all based in Calgary — could harness their know-how and adjust to a clean energy world. Instead, it simply sets a number of inconvenient truths aside.

In May 2020, Jason Kenney began slamming the "hypocrisy" of Norway's sovereign wealth fund for pulling investments from the oil sands. Even as it continues to develop new oil fields, exclusively for export, Norway is widely regarded as a leader on domestic emissions reductions and carbon-free innovations. It has the world's highest per capita ownership of electric vehicles, for example, which account for more than half of its domestic car market. It ranks eighth out of sixty-one countries in the latest Climate Change Performance Index (Canada is near the bottom, at fifty-eighth). Unlike Alberta, which squandered its mineral wealth on low taxes and corporate giveaways, Norway is using its fund — valued at over $1 trillion (U.S.) — to facilitate a meaningful transition.

The Kenney government and the Canadian fossil fuel industry generally dismiss the Norwegian approach. They continue to reject the climate science and demonize the Trudeau government. This position is misguided and dangerous. In order to navigate these precarious times, Alberta needs to find a way of working with other provincial governments and with Ottawa, instead of entertaining potential breakup scenarios. This is the actual truth that the authors of *Moment of Truth* ignore at their — and our — peril. The stakes could not be higher.

CATASTROPHE

STORIES AND LESSONS FROM THE HALIFAX EXPLOSION

T. JOSEPH SCANLON
ROGER SARTY, EDITOR

PAPER
400 PP.
978-1-77112-371-6
$39.99

Catastrophe weaves together compelling stories and potent lessons learned from the calamitous Halifax explosion—the worst non-natural disaster in North America before 9/11. It delivers an inspiring message: the women and men at "ground zero" responded speedily, courageously, and effectively, fighting fires, rescuing the injured, and sheltering the homeless.

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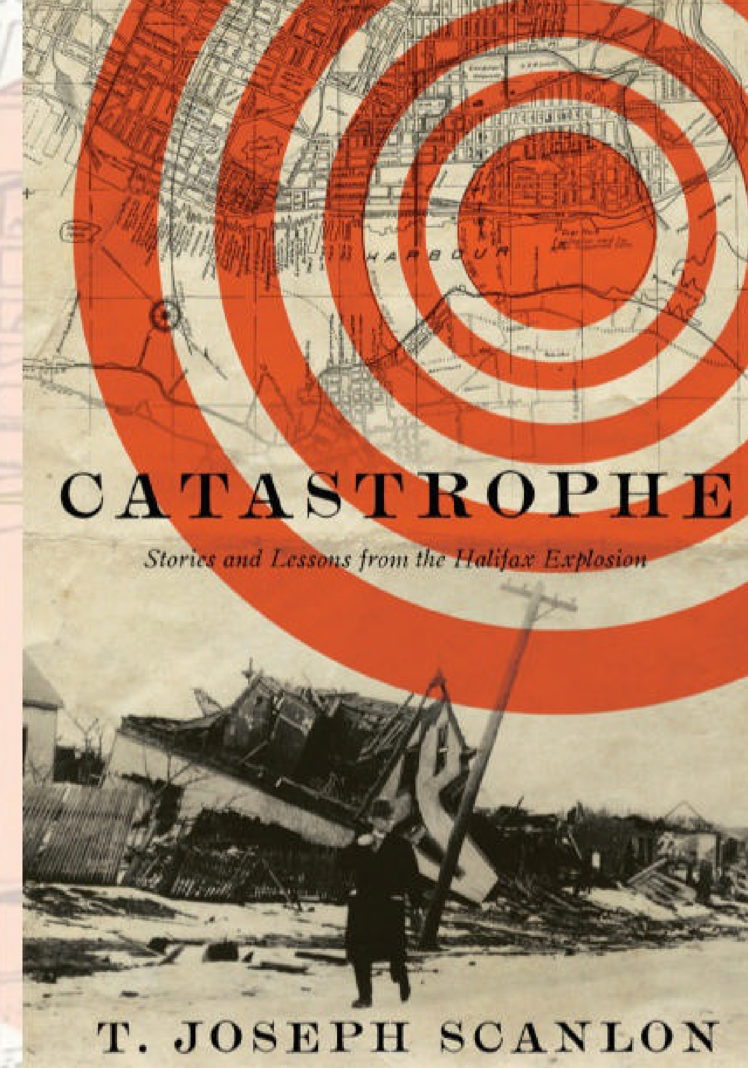

The History Books

On the Cundill Prize short list

Christopher Moore

The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company
William Dalrymple
Bloomsbury Publishing
576 pages, hardcover, softcover, and ebook

Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs
Camilla Townsend
Oxford University Press
336 pages, hardcover and ebook

Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War
Vincent Brown
Harvard University Press
336 pages, hardcover and ebook

It is no easy thing to run a global book prize from Canada, far from the great publishing empires and the kingmakers of literary fashion, but the Cundill History Prize works at it. Funded by the bequest of a Montreal investor and mostly administered through McGill University, the Cundill seeks recognition by spending a lot — $75,000 (U.S.) to each year's winner, plus $10,000 to each of the runners-up — and by going global to a degree rivalled only by the Booker Prize. The Cundill aims to identify the best histories published in English, and mostly it looks abroad to do that. A prominent Canadian (Jeffrey Simpson, Charlotte Gray) or near-Canadian (David Frum) often joins the jury, but the panels are dominated by international scholars and critics, while authors from Ivy League schools and their European counterparts are strongly represented on the short lists. In a dozen years of Cundill finalists, I find only a single book on a Canadian topic: David Hackett Fischer's *Champlain's Dream*, from 2009.

Seeking wide attention for a prize in history is a tricky mandate in itself. Of one of the early winners, Diarmaid MacCulloch's remarkable *A History of Christianity*, the critic and juror Adam Gopnik wrote, "If any book could truly fulfill the charge of the Cundill Prize — to make first class history more potent to a wide reading public, and above all to remind us that history, even three thousand years worth, matters — this one does." But a reviewer in the *Telegraph* was unconvinced: "First let me say that I don't think anyone is going to read this book. It's 1,161 pages long, for goodness sake." The Booker seems able to make thick unreadable novels you have never heard of go viral, but serious history is a tough sell in a world where even critics often take their historical orientations from fiction.

Against such prejudices, the Cundill argues the case that history — big serious history — matters. In a good year, its short lists and winners provide a chart of what deserves attention in current historical practice. For that purpose, 2020 was a good year. Its finalists — about Mughal India, Aztec Mexico, and plantation Jamaica — talk to each other about the ways the leading edge of scholarship addresses and even reconceptualizes what we might think of as contemporary concerns.

◆

William Dalrymple has lived for years in India, where he writes best-selling books that confront the realities of colonialism. In *The Anarchy*, he is at pains to explode the myth that the British Empire was dedicated to bettering India. "One of the very first Indian words to enter the English language," his opening sentence observes, "was the Hindustani slang for plunder: *loot*."

The "anarchy" of his title is double. At the start of the eighteenth century, the two-hundred-year-old Muslim Mughal empire presided over an array of semi-independent Hindu principalities, and India was probably the wealthiest society in the world. But dynastic infighting

> "Serious history is a tough sell when even critics take their orientations from fiction."

and military challenges from resurgent Mysore, Bihar, Bengal, and Avadh brought anarchy to a formerly quiescent reign. Between 1750 and 1800, the British East India Company, previously an import-export business with just a handful of employees, seized the opportunity. It built a private army larger than Britain's and exploited the local rivalries to make itself de facto ruler of the subcontinent. Then it exported unrivalled wealth home to its shareholders, unleashing on India a capitalist anarchy of famine, poverty, and dependency. A Walmart with armies, Dalrymple concludes, is no model for a society.

Dalrymple is primarily interested in how India and its rulers — the tragic emperor Shah Alam, the upstart Tipu Sultan, the kingmaking bankers of the Jagat Seth family — responded to the joint-stock company's invasion. Emperors were blinded, prisoners slaughtered, and princesses handed out as concubines, while poets lamented that the arrow of fate cannot be parried by the shield of effort. As he covers scores of battles among multiple combatants in unfamiliar places, it may be inevitable that Dalrymple must sketch his generals as brutal and brilliant when they won, fearful and indecisive when they lost. He writes a fast-moving, character-driven, and violent narrative, driven by the clash of armies and the fate of princes and commanders. But Indian society beyond the palaces of rajas and nawabs remains something of a mystery. There is a powerful critique of colonialism in *The Anarchy*, but the best history of the year should reach deeper than trumpets and drums.

◆

Camilla Townsend's *Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs* is also focused more on the conquered than on the conquerors in another epochal colonization, but Townsend, a historian at Rutgers University, barely glances at the battlefield exploits of Moctezuma or Cortés. She describes her book being born in a quiet library, "a world of frozen voices," as she "hears" a Mexica princess facing execution defiantly taunt her captors. And she revels in the strangeness of deep encounters with the distant past.

Townsend is one of a group of scholars, both in and out of Mexico, who have learned to read Nahua — the language of the Nahuatl, whom we generally call the Aztecs — to study manuscripts written by Indigenous annalists in the century after Cortés's conquest. Using the conquerors' alphabet and writing tools, they recorded their own pasts and traditions — rich, brutal, and detailed — from two hundred years before the conquest to the century after.

The Nahuatl annals recreate what had once been oral performances. Much in them is surely mythologized, and their ritual formulas and culture-specific imagery are not easily accessible to modern readers. Still, Townsend says, "in the annals, we can hear the Aztecs talking." By listening to them, puzzling out what they say, she escapes the depictions of Aztecs left to us by Spanish missionaries and conquistadors and presents Nahuatl voices on Nahuatl history.

Townsend begins with Chimalxochitl, the defiant young woman, captured and ritually sacrificed in 1299 as the Mexica, then a minor tribe migrating south from modern-day Utah, struggled to find a place in Mexico's Central Valley. Chimalxochitl was immortalized in the annals for her prediction of her descendants' eventual bloody rise to power and wealth. Later annals, recording the unexpected reign of Itzcoatl, seemingly a minor figure in the Mexica dynasty, illuminate how Tenochtitlan became a great city, dominating all the Nahuatl peoples. In the annal of Quecholcohuatl, for example, Townsend explores the resentment and the deference that subject peoples felt for their Mexica rulers.

In the Spanish invasion, Townsend gives us the perspective of a nameless woman sold by her Nahuatl nation to the distant Maya, from whom Hernan Cortés acquired her. The conquistador named her Marina. Nahua has no letter "r," so to them Marina became Malina and then, with the honorific "tzin" added, Malintzin, which was turned back into Spanish as Malinche — the name that made her famous in European histories of the conquest, as Cortés's translator, counsellor, and spouse. The Nahuatl annals enable Townsend to entirely reimagine and reinterpret her and the whole complex relationship of conquered and conqueror.

Fifth Sun, an original and disorienting version of Aztec history, does not flinch from the deep cultural barriers that Townsend — along with her readers — faces. Do we balk at the name Chimalxochitl (Chi-mal-SHO-cheet)? She warns that a simple translation — Shield Flower — might make the woman romantic, exoticized, and less real to us. The reader will have to work alongside her, she suggests. With some coaching in Nahua pronunciation ("x" sounds like "sh," the "l" in "tl" is almost mute, "hu" sounds like a "w"), she soon has us reading with growing confidence: Me-SHEE-ka for Mexica, NA-wat for Nahuatl. As much as it is a history of a Mesoamerican people, *Fifth Sun* is a meditation on the difficulties of cross-cultural understanding and the value of attempting it.

◆

Vincent Brown starts *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* with a sledgehammer anecdote about the crossing of cultures. In the 1740s, in modern-day Ghana, a military leader named Apongo regularly dealt and dined with John Cope, a British slave trader becoming rich by exporting war prisoners to the Caribbean plantations. Some years later, retired with his fortune to Jamaica, Cope met Apongo again. His African counterpart had suffered a military reversal at home and was now himself a slave, renamed Wager. From time to time, the naval captain who owned Wager allowed his neighbour Cope to invite his old business partner to dinner, and they talked of redeeming him and sending him home. But Cope died without acting on his promise. Later Wager applied his military experience as a leader and strategist to the slave uprising remembered in Jamaica as Tacky's Revolt. He did not live to see its end.

In 1760–61, Tacky's Revolt engaged more than a thousand men and women from plantations across Jamaica in a carefully planned uprising. The fighting lasted eighteen months. It wrecked the island's sugar production and required Britain to divert ships and regiments from other fronts of the Seven Years War. Tacky's Revolt remains legendary in Jamaica. But for all its heroism and hope, this slave rising seemed to follow a familiar pattern. Rebel slaves killed masters and torched isolated plantations, but they could not long withstand the organized firepower that the slave-owning state sent against them. The rebels became divided among themselves; many were betrayed by fellow slaves or by runaway Maroons, who judged the rising both hopeless and dangerous. The longest stage of Tacky's Revolt involved the hunting down and grisly execution of fugitives in the hills. Were slave uprisings just spasms of fury inexorably followed by brutal suppression?

Brown, a professor at Harvard University, complexifies that image by relentless attention to the (brilliantly mapped) geography of the conflict and to every scrap of evidence about the rebels' lives and strategies. Defining slavery as a perpetual state of war among slavers and the enslaved, he redefines Tacky's Revolt as a truly Atlantic conflict, a struggle that created "complex patterns of alliance and antagonism" that crossed oceans and empires.

In Brown's hands, Africa becomes a group of societies deeply enmeshed in the slave wars, not a blank space from which slave labour simply emerged. Warring states survived by exporting slaves to pay for the arms they needed, and then were drawn into ever more slave sales to fund expanding wars. In the process, a mix of cultures, languages, and rivalries was transferred to Jamaica, and would-be rebels shaped new alliances across widely scattered plantations. Their own histories might have left the slaves as divided as the Nahuatl facing Cortés or Indian princes battling the East India Company. But in 1760, rebel leaders knew Jamaica's sugar profits were tied to Britain's fate in the imperial wars. French and Spanish colonists, slaveholders themselves on adjacent coasts, were in a global struggle with the British and might aid a revolt that could seize and hold ground in the colony. Tacky's Revolt drew on the fury always simmering in the slave barracks, but it was timed to exploit a moment of Britain's vulnerability amid a global war. Apongo becomes not some romantic prince tragically enslaved but one of many plantation labourers who brought with them experience of war and a deep awareness of how violence could turn masters into slaves and perhaps vice versa.

Intricately mapping each of the linked but local uprisings across Jamaica and relating them to tides in the global struggle, Brown demonstrates how the rebels applied strategic concepts mastered in wars an ocean away, some moving to defensible redoubts in the hills, others urging the need to hold an outlet to the sea. He shows how they acted on motives and opportunities as global and complex as those of the military officers and planter militias who moved to contain and kill them.

Brown's one handicap is that he found no equivalent, either in Africa or in the Caribbean, of the Mughal poets and historians or the Nahuatl annalists. To reach those whom he seeks to understand, he must tease evidence of motivations, alliances, and strategies out of the enslavers' bigoted and biased records. He makes *Tacky's Revolt* a tour de force of research, theory, and historical imagination that transforms anonymous labouring slaves into actors of tragic majesty in an intricate conflict.

◆

Topics on the short list of ten books for the 2020 Cundill Prize ranged from Cromwell's England to twentieth-century Palestine, from Middle Eastern rivalries to the dispossession of Indigenous Americans. The jury singled out three finalists that explore colonized and racialized peoples in the clashes of culture that underpinned colonialism around the world. None of the authors comes from the societies they write about. Dalrymple, from an aristocratic Scots family, evokes oppressed India. Townsend, a white professor raised in New York City, seeks the Nahuatl beneath the overpowering narratives of their conquerors. Brown, an African American scholar and filmmaker raised in San Diego, California, explores the intricate loyalties of eighteenth-century Africans enslaved in the Caribbean. In the twenty-first century, when many argue that no one from privilege can or should speak for the colonized and oppressed, some might ask if these are all case studies in appropriation.

Townsend gives the best reply. She emphasizes, even embraces, the difficulties of cross-cultural understanding. She suggests, in not quite so many words, that in writing history, what we call cultural appropriation is unavoidable and essential. Even one's own ancestors of two hundred years past are almost unfathomably strange to anyone alive today. If historians will not make the effort to bridge the chasms, who will? History, Townsend does say, is exciting not in spite of these challenges but because of them. The Nahuatl annalists, she declares, wanted posterity to hear them, and they said so clearly in their writings: "Do we ourselves not become both wiser and stronger every time we grasp the perspective of people whom we once dismissed?"

The Cundill jurors, with three impressive books about the violence and oppression that mark our world's origins, may have been persuaded by that passion. By choosing William Dalrymple, they could have associated the prize with an admired and popular bestseller by a historian who is not a professor. By choosing Vincent Brown, they could have crowned the first person of colour for a prize that remains vulnerable to a #CundillSoWhite hashtag. But it is *Fifth Sun*, the intersection of a gifted historian and a remarkable source, that they chose in December 2020.

At Daggers Drawn

Margarent MacMillan soldiers on

J. L. Granatstein

War: How Conflict Shaped Us
Margaret MacMillan
Allen Lane
336 pages, hardcover, ebook, and audiobook

Canadians don't like to think about war. As the historian Tim Cook shows in his most recent book, *The Fight for History*, this country largely forgot about the Second World War for fifty years. It was only in the mid-1990s that Canadians were finally moved by the CBC's coverage of D-Day and V-E Day anniversaries — coverage that showed what our soldiers had done and how they were remembered by those they had liberated. The veterans' parades in Holland and the crowds of cheering Dutch had a substantial impact. So too did the dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Ottawa, in 2000, and the watching crowd's spontaneous placing of thousands of poppies on the granite memorial.

But when Stephen Harper's government tried to commemorate the bicentennial of the War of 1812, most had a shared reaction of a different kind: people saw it as both an unimportant event and another of the prime minister's attempts to glorify militarism. The government eased back, and the commemorations largely fizzled. That there would not have been a Canada if the Americans had won that fight did not seem to matter to scholars or the public. And by the time centenary celebrations of the Great War stirred other memories a couple of years later, there were no veterans left to honour in person.

Margaret MacMillan knows a great deal about such ambivalence. She once proposed a "War and Society" course at Ryerson University, only to have a visiting educational consultant advise her to change the name to "A History of Peace." As she points out in her new book, *War: How Conflict Shaped Us*, the study of war is now largely ignored in most Western universities, because simply researching or thinking about conflict implies approval to too many. And even though courses on military history can put bums in seats, and even as fewer and fewer students choose to major in history, departments are reluctant to offer them. (When a chair of history at York University once suggested adding a few, his colleagues rejected the notion out of hand.) The disconnect is curious, MacMillan notes, because we live in a world shaped by war, and we need to study its causes, its horrors and glories, and its past and present effects. We need more research on the subject, in other words, not its removal from curricula.

MacMillan makes another important point: historians and readers must remember that those who lived in the past had their own values, principles, and attitudes, and they can be understood only in context. Soldiers were often brutal and licentious, but so too were the times they lived in. We can be shocked and horrified, but we should try to understand how and why they acted as they did. This takes work. Today, those wishing to pull down statues are often applying modern morality to another era. This makes for bad, easy history, and it is important for a historian of MacMillan's stature to stand up for the way the past should be handled.

◆

Margaret MacMillan was a little-known Ryerson professor when she applied to Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, in the 1990s, for research funding for a book on the Paris Peace Conference. She was turned down, SSHRC told her, because her approach was so old-fashioned. When she completed the manuscript of what became *Paris 1919*, early in the 2000s, she offered it to Harvard University Press, which said it could not afford to publish books that so few would read. (This was arguably one of the worst decisions in the press's history, and one that says a good deal about academic publishing.) When her book finally found a home with a trade publisher, in London, it caught the public's attention, became an enormous bestseller, and won a host of prizes. Soon MacMillan was provost of the University of Toronto's Trinity College, before becoming warden of St. Antony's College at Oxford, in 2007. Other bestsellers followed, notably *Nixon in China* and *The War That Ended Peace*.

It's in our bones.

Anonymous, Two Warriors Fighting; Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

Since publishing that first book that so few would supposedly read, MacMillan has received multiple honorary degrees and become an officer of the Order of Canada, in 2006 (she was promoted to companion in 2015). And in 2018, she became a Companion of Honour, one of just three Canadians presently recognized (the others being the retired general and diplomat John de Chastelain and Margaret Atwood). It seems that well-written and engaging narrative history isn't so old-fashioned after all.

Certainly *War*, based on MacMillan's 2018 Reith Lectures, commissioned by the BBC, is selling a lot of copies. Organized in thematic chapters, it is written with style and confidence, and it displays her encyclopedic knowledge, which covers thousands of years. We learn about the reasons for armed conflict, how technology is employed, and how warriors are made. War, MacMillan tells us, is not an aberration. It is in our bones. The need for security led people to organize themselves into tribes and eventually states and nations, which they discovered was an efficient way to wage battle. And when failed states fail at war, their civilians suffer the most (she estimates, for example, that 50 million on all sides died during the Second World War from bombing, genocide, disease, and starvation).

MacMillan is especially good on the role of women, noting that female warriors have played prominent roles over the centuries. In the Soviet Union's Great Patriotic War against the Nazis, for instance, they served as front-line fighters and as pilots. Of course, as she also notes, the Red Army took a terrible revenge on German women, raping hundreds of thousands of the young and old as it moved west. After V-E Day, Fräuleins, trying to survive in a ruined nation, had liaisons with Allied servicemen and were scorned: "It took six years to beat the German soldier," one bitter joke went, "but it only took five minutes to win over a German woman." Decades later, rape as a weapon of war has remained a potent tactic. In the savage fighting that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia, in the 1990s, "Serb rapists took pleasure in telling Muslim women that they would give birth to future Serb warriors," and the Serbs carried out "public rape to intimidate and gain information as well as to encourage non-Serbs to flee."

◆

I was in the Canadian Army for a decade, beginning in 1956, and as I served only in Ontario, I never heard a shot fired in anger. What I remember is the pleasure of being among

hundreds of Royal Military College cadets in handsome scarlet tunics, accompanied by a military band and pipers and cheering spectators, staging splendid parade-square ceremonials with the colours flying and swords flashing. MacMillan rightly talks about the importance of such time-honoured training and about the discipline it takes to make a warrior.

I also recall one particularly exhausting week-long exercise in the field and thinking that I might never get clean again. And I remember my friends who went to Europe as part of the 5,000-man NATO brigade. They knew they had only thin-skinned three-quarter-ton trucks to take on the Soviets — not armoured personnel carriers — but they fervently believed they were part of the best little army in the world (and certainly the best in NATO). They were convinced that they would beat the Red Army if it came to that. The utter weariness that's inherent in soldiering and the esprit de corps that can overcome good sense don't receive much attention in *War* but probably should have.

Organization is key to the conduct of war. Armies plan and prepare for a wide range of contingencies. Sometimes their leaders get it right, sometimes not, but discipline and organizational skill always remain. MacMillan notes the maxim that no plan survives contact with the enemy. France's fortified Maginot Line is often cited as a classic plan that failed (although Alan Allport's fine new *Britain at Bay: The Epic Story of the Second World War, 1938–1941* convincingly argues the contrary). You could also point to just last summer: no soldier had planned for the death trap that long-term-care facilities in Ontario and Quebec became early in the pandemic. But in short order, the well-organized Canadian Armed Forces sent some 1,600 men and women into the homes, restored order, and began cleaning up the mess. It's no surprise that the federal and Ontario governments went on to tap retired generals to manage the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccines.

I also think of the impact my time in the army had on me personally. I was a feckless seventeen-year-old when I took the Queen's shilling, and by the time I became a civilian again ten years later, I was a driven organizational whiz. "Get it done right, and get it done on time" had become my watchword. I planned almost automatically, did my work efficiently, and accomplished a good deal. As an academic, I found that I could organize a course or a conference or write an article or book quickly; unlike most academics, I delivered my work on time, and when asked for 1,000 words, I did not submit 5,000. I made my career out of the skills the military gave me. (Now I must admit my type A personality didn't work quite so well when I tried to give my family a little military efficiency, but I eventually learned to control myself.)

That's a roundabout way of saying that MacMillan is correct: today in the West, we see peace as the norm, but it's really not. We rarely think about conflict, when we probably should. Nation-on-nation war has declined in the past seventy-five years, but there are small wars aplenty and civil wars without number. Indeed, controlling war is practically impossible. "Jaw, jaw" is better than "war, war," Winston Churchill famously said. He was right, but the absolutely clear lesson of Margaret MacMillan's book is that "war, war" will always be with us. There remains much to learn in that.

Literary Review of Canada

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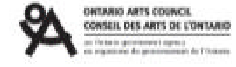


Jigging for Answers

Scratched records of a Métis family

Heather Menzies

Approaching Fire
Michelle Porter
Breakwater Books
200 pages, softcover

Three underlying facts propel this poetic and often poignant book: in September 1870, an anti-Métis militia stoned to death Elzéar Goulet, an uncle of the author's great-grandfather, the fiddler Léon Joseph Robert Goulet; family photos and records were deliberately burned decades later; and a fear has been passed down from generation to generation. "Be careful," a respected elder tells the author: "you'll be criticized for / speaking out for / the Métis for / your people / for telling your story."

Approaching Fire is an exploration of absence, erasure, and the irrepressible yearning to discover what has been suppressed. Ostensibly, it is the poet, journalist, and writer Michelle Porter's attempt to make sense of her great-grandfather's career as a stage and radio performer in 1930s Winnipeg, before Léon Robert Goulet abandoned the spotlight and headed to Mission, British Columbia. The move was motivated, or so Porter has been told, by a desire to protect his daughters "from what it meant to be Métis / in Manitoba." One of those daughters, Porter's beautiful grandmother Estelle, ends up incapacitated by depression: "Was this beauty a comfort to her then? She's / falling and falling and she can't get out of bed." Goulet's niece Lilian comes west to help care for Estelle and her seven children. While there, she takes it upon herself to destroy all the family memorabilia, though this becomes clear only toward the end of the book. But suggestive hints about her setting a fire out back, where no one can stop her, are dropped throughout. They stalk the narrative like a curse.

This curse is in keeping with a much larger story. As Porter says early on, quoting the lawyer and author Jean Teillet, the boundaries of the Métis Nation have always been more social than geographic, composed of stories that lend muscle, bone, and memory to that foundational word Métis. "This word is a story we are telling each other," Porter writes. But what happens when all you're left with is scraps — and charred ones at that? Porter learns that her great-grandfather left school after grade 3, for instance. But the reason why "didn't make it to my mother's oral histories."

With little to go on, Porter creates something of a scrapbook of her hit-and-miss search: a patchwork of poems, semi-scholarly expositions on the science of controlled burnings and intergenerational traumas, and excerpts from an oral history going back to the dying days of the buffalo hunt. There are also posters for Goulet's performances, sometimes with his daughters, and various labels from old 78s, including one of "The Red River Jig," which he recorded for Victor in 1928.

It's an ambitious mix, made even more so by Porter's decision to leave so much unexplained. Cryptic newspaper clippings about Métis scrip — a type of land voucher that Ottawa created in 1870 — are an example. One, posted by A. Gauvin & Co. of St. Boniface, announces: "Half-breed scrip for sale." In another, "Fred J. Hosken begs to notify persons desirous of purchasing Half-Breed Scrip (which will entitle the holder to 160 acres of land in the Province of Manitoba)" that he will be selling it. Yet another reports someone in Montreal exhorting people to go west because "now the Half-breed land scrips and homesteads are being literally given away." These references flit through the pages like ghosts, suggesting how scrip served as a medium more of land *dispossession* than of possession — though not saying so, or daring to say so, explicitly.

An anguishing and frustrating quest.

◆

In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, a speculative non-fiction account of Black women in early twentieth-century America, the Columbia University professor Saidiya Hartman writes, "Every historian of the multitude, the dispossessed, the subaltern, and the enslaved is forced to grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor." In that sense, it seems that Porter's intent with *Approaching Fire* is not so much to inform as to evoke. By using what the archives do offer, she draws attention to what's missing and suggests that the preserved record misleads and distorts: "And what is the story / I am making beside his / alongside his music / as if I too am lost?"

In many clippings, Goulet appears impeccably groomed in suit and tie, with nothing that overtly signifies his Métis identity. Similarly, recurring references to "old-time" music and musicians suggest a culture that's partially sequestered in the past:

> The flute vanished
> almost as if the final French-Canadian
> connection
> had walked away hardly ever spoke
> French anymore
> and the Michif passed down the line
> was the language played on the fiddles

Before he was murdered, Porter's ancestor Elzéar Goulet was part of Louis Riel's provisional government and served on the court martial of Thomas Scott. One of Elzéar's brothers, Roger, became a successful land surveyor, making it easier for settlers to take up the land; and Robert Goulet's own father, Maxime, became a minister of agriculture in the newly formed Manitoba government. How does one reconcile the seeming contradictions of one's family tree?

Burdened with the accumulating questions, Porter begins a series of speculative letters addressed to her great-grandfather ("Dear Pépé"). But after a promising first of these — "With each word I place on paper, I am looking for you" — the prose becomes disappointingly shallow. By contrast, Porter's poetry shines, especially as she focuses on the often anguished and frustrated experience of her quest. Some of the best poems employ metaphors of beadwork — negotiating the needle's passage, the blood of a pricked finger, the tension of threads.

Ultimately, Porter does not answer all of her questions, but merely posing them and letting them hang might be enough. It might also help mark this book as part of an emergent decolonizing literature, a kind of shadow companion to Alberto Manguel's *A History of Reading*. Think of it as an unreading of history: a reckoning with all that has been written off, written out, and written over.

Katty Maurey

Thereby Hangs a Tail

With the ghosts of Madagascar

Alexander Sallas

Chasing Lemurs: My Journey into the Heart of Madagascar
Keriann McGoogan
Prometheus Books
240 pages, hardcover

An island nation's claim to fame.

François Guerraz; Wikimedia Commons

In 2006, Keriann McGoogan, a twenty-five-year-old doctoral candidate in biological anthropology at the University of Toronto, led an expedition into the wilds of Madagascar. She undertook the journey to study lemurs, among the world's most endangered primates, but her trip spiralled into a maelstrom of disease and political machinations, punctuated by masochistic hikes, traveller's diarrhea, and one nasty evacuation. These calamities, and more, are retold in her engaging account of the trip, *Chasing Lemurs*. Readers unfamiliar with lemurs — or those whose knowledge of them derives entirely from the children's TV show *Zoboomafoo* — will find a lot to chew on.

Owing to its eighty-eight-million-year separation from other land masses, Madagascar houses more endemic species than any other country. These include several hundred unique birds and reptiles and some 11,000 vascular plants. But lemurs are the island's claim to fame: it contains 111 unique kinds. The indri, for example, is the largest living lemur and resembles "a two-year-old in a panda suit," as McGoogan puts it. The aye-aye, a nocturnal critter, drills holes in trees with its ferocious incisors and scoops out tasty insects using its long, bony middle finger. Most astonishing of all is the giant lemur, about the size of a gorilla, which roamed the forest as recently as 500 years ago — and might still be alive today were it not for human butchery. (Not for nothing, perhaps, "lemur" comes from the Latin word for ghost.)

McGoogan focuses her research on two subspecies. One, Von der Decken's sifaka, is a "medium-sized diurnal lemur, with a beautiful, pure-white coat." The other, the crowned sifaka, belongs to the same genus, *Propithecus*, but features a "chocolate-brown to black head, neck, and throat." Both live deep in Kasijy, a wildlife reserve of fragmented deciduous forests. McGoogan is the first to collect behavioural data for the sifakas from within their natural habitat. This is important work; these species and others are critically endangered.

"Habitat edging" is a serious concern in lemur land. Since the 1950s, almost half of Madagascar's forests have been converted to non-forest habitat, repurposed for farming or hacked away for charcoal production. Some lemur populations are "edge tolerant" and display no preference between the interior and the perimeter. Many others, including Von der Decken's sifaka and the crowned sifaka, are "edge avoiders," who are unable to subsist on the forest rim. For them, higher ambient temperatures along the edge may prevent "torpor," a state of reduced body temperature and metabolic rate that lets them survive periods of scant food availability. Habitat edging also destroys leaves and insects, which tend to thrive on the perimeter and make up a significant portion of the lemurs' diets. Out-of-control fires, meanwhile, lead to "forest fragmentation," which McGoogan describes as "islands of forest surrounded by 'seas' of non-forest." The conflagrations split pockets of habitat and create even more edges — exacerbating the problem.

But lemurs aren't the only ones in danger. McGoogan notes several threats to the human beings who venture into their habitat. "Don't get bit, don't get hit, and don't get lit," a doctor advises her before she sets out. To that end, she prepares with countless prescriptions and shots. But even those don't protect against everything. After returning to Canada, she contracts *P. vivax* malaria — to the astonishment of the staff at Toronto General Hospital, where she spends hours on a wooden bench, stomach reeling, head swimming, and waiting for a doctor.

As good edutainment should, *Chasing Lemurs* straddles the uneasy gulf between information and plot. The colourful cast of supporting characters includes McGoogan's Malagasy research assistants, Andry and Sahoby, the jokester and the straight man, respectively; her doctoral supervisor, Shawn, a six-foot-five expert in primate conservation biogeography; and her supportive but worried fiancé, Travis, whose concerned emails pepper the narrative. McGoogan is the only woman on the trip. She relishes this status, even as it causes her some concern, knowing as she does that female travellers must navigate often shifting cultural norms and deflect unwanted attention. She worries, too, about being viewed as "less strong and less capable than the rest." But her grit and determination dispel that worry rather quickly.

Madagascar, McGoogan notes, is one of the poorest countries in the world, with 85 percent of its population living below the poverty line. In a gut-wrenching passage, she describes two shoeless and malnourished six- or seven-year-olds in tattered dresses, their hands outstretched; one has a limp baby strapped to her back. This experience and others like it inspire McGoogan to organize a non-profit, Planet Madagascar, that conducts livelihood surveys and runs community conservation projects in education and fire management, among other ventures. (In 2016, it received a large grant from Ottawa.)

In spending time with playful primates and inspiring Malagasy, McGoogan isn't monkeying around. While existential crises such as climate change and poverty may occur on an island, they're not occurring in isolation. These are problems to be tackled worldwide — problems that will require the same bravery, creativity, and resolve she displayed in the wild. Madagascar and its lemurs are just the beginning.

Around the Bend

The many ways rivers run through it

Robert Girvan

Magdalena: River of Dreams
Wade Davis
Knopf Canada
432 pages, hardcover, ebook, and audiobook

Restigouche: The Long Run of the Wild River
Philip Lee
Goose Lane
272 pages, softcover

Wade Davis begins his book *Magdalena* near the mouth of Colombia's principal river, in Bocas de Ceniza on the northern coast, on a jetty that extends many kilometres into the Caribbean Sea. Men and women who work the surrounding waters live in shacks that precariously line the breakwater, and on their bleached walls, they've painted humble poetry that praises the fishing, the peace, and the sound of the waves. A narrow-gauge railway line runs between the small houses, carrying local tourists looking for the sun and perhaps a cone of shaved ice. The trains occasionally derail, and if someone has a cassette player with them, a dance might break out. But no one drinks from the toxic waterway, which is "contaminated by human and industrial waste." Some will not even eat the fish. They remember when bodies once floated down the "graveyard of the nation."

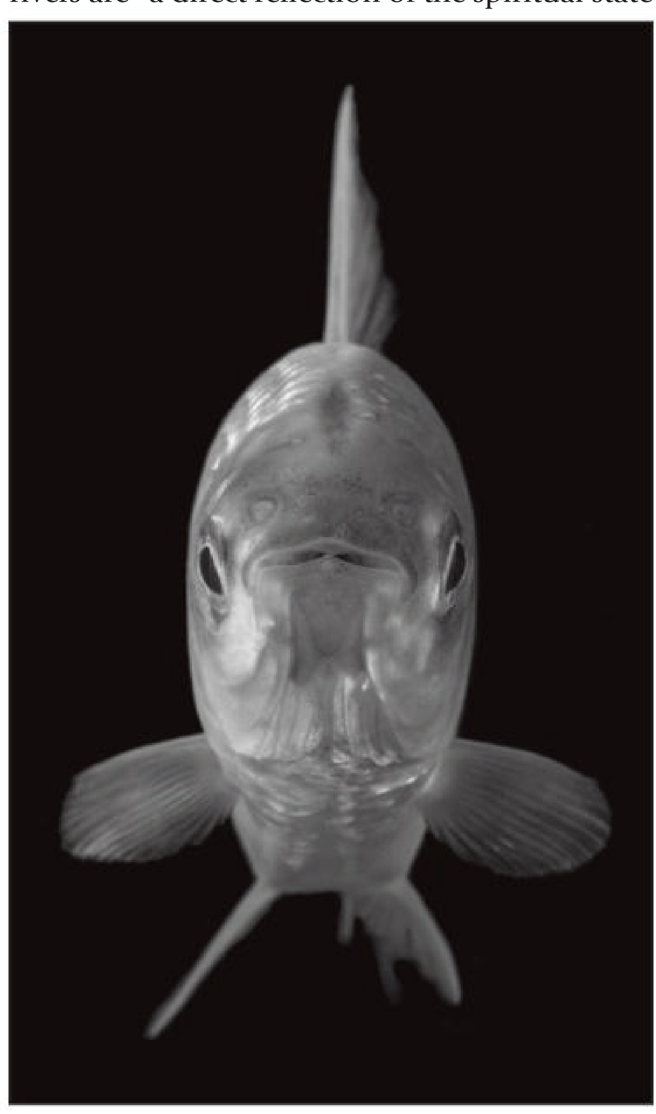
Many of the themes in this heartfelt and sprawling book can be glimpsed on that jetty: human violence, hubris, and the willful ignorance that so often harms the innocent and ruptures ecosystems. Yet there's also Dionysian joy and optimism to be found in this "compendium of stories."

In 2014, Davis, the Canadian anthropologist and honorary Colombian citizen, proposed a book, "half in jest," about "the Mississippi of Colombia, the vital artery of commerce and culture." He then set out to explore the Magdalena drainage basin — home to four of every five Colombians — by foot, car, and boat. With old friends, guides, and people he meets along the way, he made five extended trips in all seasons, travelling northbound the length of the country on or near the 1,500-kilometre river, from its source in the south to the sea. In describing the river — its waters, its forests, its animals and people and music and dance — Davis hopes to tell "the story of Colombia," where he has spent time off and on since he was young. In this way, *Magdalena* is less of a travelogue and more the biography of a nation.

On the surface, an English-language book about the Magdalena, named after the often misunderstood Biblical figure Mary Magdalene, is not an obvious choice. Relatively few readers in North America know of the river — beyond references in Gabriel García Márquez novels, perhaps — but many know of Davis and his work. As with a good novel, we come to care deeply about the Magdalena and its characters, because our narrator himself cares about them so much.

◆

Traditionally, the *mamos* — the spiritual leaders of the Arhuaco people — would periodically assess the Magdalena's "health and well-being at every point along its flow." For them, rivers are "a direct reflection of the spiritual state of a people, an infallible indicator of the level of consciousness a community possesses." In other words, Davis explains early in the book, rivers are simply "the soul of any land through which they flow." This is a truth that many of the Colombians he encounters repeat along the way.



A lone face of the Magdalena.

Davis begins his journey on foot near the river's source. At 3,400 or so metres, the mountainous Alto Magdalena region is a place of cascading water, mist, and *páramos*, treeless plateaus that are essential to South America's larger hydrological cycle. Davis sets off with a botanist friend: "William led me along a dirt track that ran through a dry forest of scrub and frail acacias before turning back to the banks of the Suaza. For him, every blade of grass along the trail resonated with a story." This motif returns again and again: the importance of grounded knowledge, whether from a traditional perspective or from a modern scientific one.

Beauty and tragedy are tightly woven together in Colombia. Puracé National Park, for example, is home to seven snow-clad volcanoes that soar over 4,300 metres and to more than 200 species of orchids; it was also a major conflict zone during the fifty-year asymmetric war between the government, far-right paramilitary groups, and far-left guerrilla organizations, such as the FARC. The fighting ended in 2016, but not before it defined the country for many around the world. Conflict along the Magdalena is hardly a modern phenomenon, of course. The Spanish arrived in 1538, and in a clash of "Andalusian steel against weapons of wood," the Muisca people and many others were decimated. "Within 150 years of Columbus, the original native population of 70 million in all the Americas would be reduced to 3.5 million," Davis writes. "In the southern Andes of Bolivia, on a mountain of silver once sacred to the Inca, an average of 75 indigenous men and women were to die every day for 350 years."

In Medio Magdalena, the river comes down from the heights, and the valley widens — thirty kilometres across in some places. It was here, in the middle, that commercialization of the river began in the nineteenth century. Steamships were a modern marvel that linked the young mountainous country in new ways, but they were also a catalyst for severe deforestation. Colombians and foreign corporations alike saw the forests as "a limitless resource that only stood in the way of development." Felled trees powered the ships, which passengers used as "platforms for the hunting of manatees, blue turtles, ocelots, and jaguars. Men shot herons from the upper deck for sport. Children cut open the bellies of iguanas, replaced their eggs with manure, and tossed them back into the river."

More recently, Colombia has constructed two major dams that supply nearly a quarter of the country's energy needs: "Between La Jagua and Garzón, and for another sixty miles to Gigante and beyond, the Magdalena runs through a narrow gorge, a cleft in the landscape with the very dimensions, orientation, and geological substrata that cause dam builders to swoon." From an engineering standpoint, these massive structures are also modern marvels. "The problem, of course, lies in the details." Without fish ladders that would "allow migratory species to stay true to their breeding and spawning regimes," the dams have contributed to environmental catastrophe: "Fish stocks in the Magdalena have collapsed by 50 percent in thirty

Jorge García, *Cyphocharax magdalenae*; VW Pics; Getty Images

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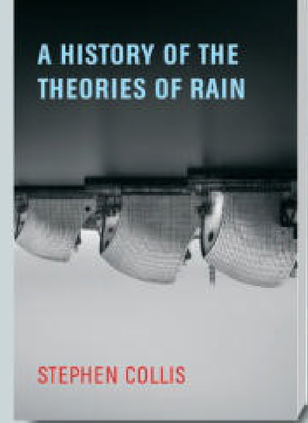

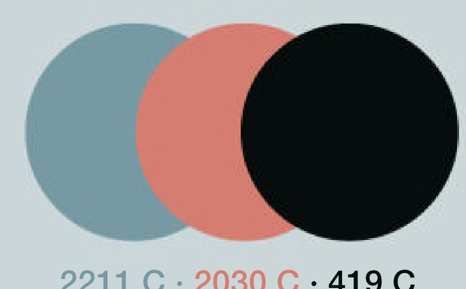

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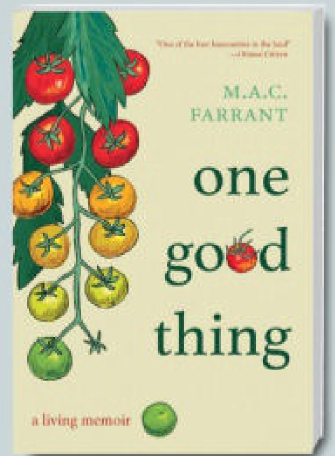

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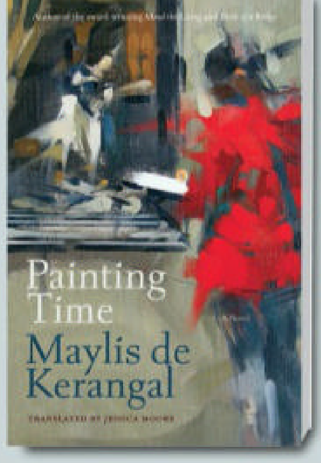

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years," while the river's drainage basin has lost nearly 80 percent of its canopy. "Erosion darkens its flow, with some 250 million tons of silt and debris each year. Few rivers in the world have been so adversely affected by sediments." Then there are the 32 million people who flush their toilets directly into the Magdalena each day. In the management and mismanagement of the watershed, we see a country "forfeiting the future for the essential needs of today."

The great García Márquez, who made the river "not a setting but a character in his novels," once proclaimed his beloved Magdalena "dead." Many others might proclaim it "ignored." While the river is "the lifeblood of their land, the spiritual fiber of their being," Davis describes a people who have long looked the other way. "We have always turned our backs on the Magdalena," says one man, who has studied it for decades. "We have done so forever." Others make the same point. "We turned our backs on the river that gave us life," a stranger who quickly becomes a friend explains. "But to deny the Río Magdalena is to betray all that we are as Colombians."

It's easier to finally face the river now that the decades-long conflict has come to an end. The stories of those who suffered during the war — partially funded by cocaine, which most Colombians "have never used or seen" — are haunting. Over 200,000 innocent people died and millions more suffered. Even at the most dangerous moments, though, some stood for human dignity. One woman, in response to a dream, visited her mother's killer in jail, listened to his apology, and forgave him. A young man — who came to be known as "the dude of the dead" — repeatedly risked his life to pick up bodies that no one would dare to touch. One town collected, buried, and left memorials to the unnamed dead, pulled from what many began to call the River of Death.

When Davis visits Medellín, he traces the career of Pablo Escobar, who once controlled drug revenues that exceeded $20 billion a year. "His net worth was $55 billion, making him the richest criminal in history. And the bloodiest." At one point, Davis compares Escobar with Al Capone, the Chicago mobster who personally killed thirty-three. "In the decade of terror unleashed by Escobar, in Medellín alone, more than forty-six thousand would die."

But times have changed. Escobar died in 1993, and young architects and designers have fundamentally remade the city he once terrified — focusing as much on reimagining the poor and distant barrios as on improvements to the centre — through a movement known as *urbanismo social*. "On a mission to save their city, they embraced and remained loyal to three articles of faith: Pessimism is an indulgence, orthodoxy the enemy of invention, despair an insult to the imagination." As Davis shows, it's a lesson that can also apply to the river: trees can be replanted, habitat can be rehabilitated, a new flourishing is possible — often faster and cheaper than expected. "Stories of rebirth and redemption have become commonplace as people throughout the world have embraced their rivers as symbols of patrimony and pride," he writes. Think of the Seine, the Hudson, the Cuyahoga, the Thames.

In the Bajo Magdalena, some 240 kilometres from the Caribbean, the river actually falls below sea level and stops flowing. Mountain runoff helps push it the rest of the way: "Like the arteries and veins in the human body, a network of waterways reaches across the ancient delta to connect the snowfields of the Sierra Nevada, the most sacred destination of the pilgrims, with the river that made possible the life of the Colombian nation."

Toward the end of Davis's journey, an elegant retiree recounts the story of Simón Bolívar, whom the Enlightenment polymath and Magdalena explorer Alexander von Humboldt first dubbed El Libertador. "It was here that everything came together," the retired man tells Davis. "The story of a continent, of a country, of a precious ecosystem whose biodiversity is unmatched anywhere in the world — they're all linked. "Colombia's very freedom," Davis writes, "won in battle two hundred years ago, grew in good measure out of Bolívar's transcendent faith in the messages of the wild, the threads of loyalty that bind a people to their mountains, forests, rivers, and wetlands."

◆

In April 2018, some 4,000 kilometres northeast of where the Magdalena finally meets the Caribbean, the journalist and St. Thomas University professor Philip Lee drove from Fredericton to a village called Tide Head, four hours away, to visit with the biologist Alan Madden, "a man who knows the Restigouche as intimately as anyone on Earth." There they first discussed what would become a worthy companion to Davis's book, Lee's *Restigouche: The Long Run of a Wild River*.

The Restigouche, though diminished from its former glory when the salmon runs were "prodigious," remains a great salmon-fishing river. And Lee knows it well. He's camped beside it, canoed upon it, and fished it since he was a child. He has also witnessed the quickening pace of ecological damage:

> In each new season I watched assaults on natural systems spread through the valley. Some I have seen with my own eyes: the logging trucks rumbling down from the hills twenty-four hours a day; the cuts growing larger and creeping ever closer to the river; feeder brooks that once flowed through the summer now dry and choked with sediment washed down from nearby logging and more distant industrial enterprises. The hills have been sprayed from the air with pesticides and herbicides, and the old mixed forests transformed into new monoculture tree plantations.

Even as he has watched the degradation in real time, he has wondered, How did this happen?

Over the years, study after study has predicted "the numbers of direct and indirect jobs that will be created and tax revenues that may be collected" through resource extraction in New Brunswick, but Lee has rarely seen the living place he knows reflected in the technical reports about the Restigouche. So he asked himself a question not unlike the one Davis asked over and over in Colombia: "Could a truer measure of what's worth saving be found in the story of the life of one wild river?"

As it flows for 200 kilometres, northeast from the Appalachian Mountains to Chaleur Bay, on the Gulf of Saint Lawrence, the Restigouche marks the border between Quebec and New Brunswick. Lee organizes the river's story around three extended canoe trips, where he was joined

by family members and friends who know the waterway intimately. These trips were joyous, meditative, and occasionally rain soaked. "The inevitable difficulties and hardships we encounter on trips such as these," he writes, "and in the passages of our lives, are necessary obstacles to overcome. Sometimes we have no choice but to pull our canoe over a shallow gravel bar or shoulder it across a portage. In my life, I've done my share of both."

Lee offers plain, concrete descriptions of the life that flows around him, which he complements with engaging chapters on the complex, multi-layered history of the region, using excerpts from original documents wherever possible. Of course, human violence, hubris, and willful ignorance have played out in New Brunswick too. So as we learn of great fishing pools and iconoclastic river guides, we also learn of a billionaire family that controls an "industrial forest" that covers 200,000 hectares and of a mid-century hydroelectric scheme billed as the "economic salvation of our province." Constructed in the 1960s, the Mactaquac dam, upstream from Fredericton and capable of generating 20 percent of the province's power, was "designed to transform this great river into an asset." But it has ravaged salmon stocks on its way to becoming "a liability for an already highly leveraged power utility."

Lee also integrates the long-ignored history and deep culture of the Mi'gmaq, who have lived intimately with the river for generations. Signed in the mid-eighteenth century, the Peace and Friendship Treaties "confirmed their right to fish and hunt in their traditional territory," but the British did not honour those guarantees on the Restigouche, where colonial officials introduced "the common law tradition of private fishing rights and a history of regulation that gave priority to angling over harvesting for food with nets or spears." Angling was a "refinement of a civilized people," and eventually New Brunswick began leasing exclusive fishing rights along the river to those who were, purportedly, the most refined. In June 1880, Chester Arthur (soon to become the twenty-first U.S. president), Charles Lewis Tiffany (the jeweller), William Kissam Vanderbilt (the railroad tycoon), and others of New York's super elite bought roughly 650 hectares and formed the Restigouche Salmon Club. That was just the beginning.

Soon it wasn't only the Mi'gmaq who could no longer fish their river; most citizens of New Brunswick were kept away by leases that were sold to the highest bidder. A century after the Restigouche Salmon Club was founded, in what came to be known as the Battle of Larry's Gulch, local residents protested the lack of public fishing access before being dispersed by the RCMP. From fishing rights to the management of Crown forests, Lee describes how rich families and corporations have long wielded too much influence over the Restigouche. "It's a situation in which there really is a deficit in terms of democratic decision-making about our natural resources," he quotes the historian Bill Parenteau as saying.

Corporate influence has even affected conceptions of time in the region. In 1876, the Scottish-born Canadian engineer Sandford Fleming "opened the river valley to the world" with a railway bridge downriver from Matapédia. With the rail lines came economic development and an imposed temporal standardization: "We all now live according to the practical and predictable rhythms of the same clock that is regulated by the artificial lines we have drawn across our maps," Lee writes. "But the river still keeps its own time." To acknowledge this, Lee maintains, is to acknowledge the flux of creation, a Mi'gmaq concept and way of being based on an understanding that people "are all part of a divine process in an ever-changing world." With more river leases coming up for auction in 2023, he sees that understanding as key to the wise stewardship of the Restigouche going forward. Lee knows the value of science, but he suggests that we can mistake abstraction for life and often forget that we too are part of nature.

◆

ONE DAY, WHILE WATCHING AN EAGLE RIDE THE updrafts, Lee thought of the writer and senator David Adams Richards, who has spoken of the "spiritual readjustment" one can draw from a river. "We have too much, we fret too much, we hoard away too much for ourselves," Richards has written. Spending time on the water, however, can remind us that "human kindness matters, and companionship, and our love of and protection for those who are far away from us at that moment, but not much else."

A newspaper editor once told Lee more or less the same thing: "A true story well told becomes a parable." Indeed, the well-told story of the Restigouche, like the well-told story of the Magdalena, has much to teach us. Though degraded and though different in many ways, both rivers are what Davis describes as open books—"with countless pages and chapters yet to be written."

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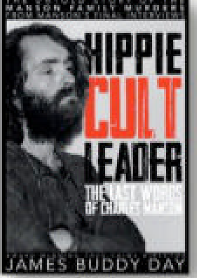

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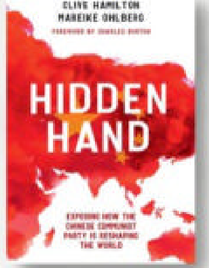

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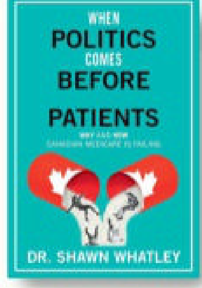

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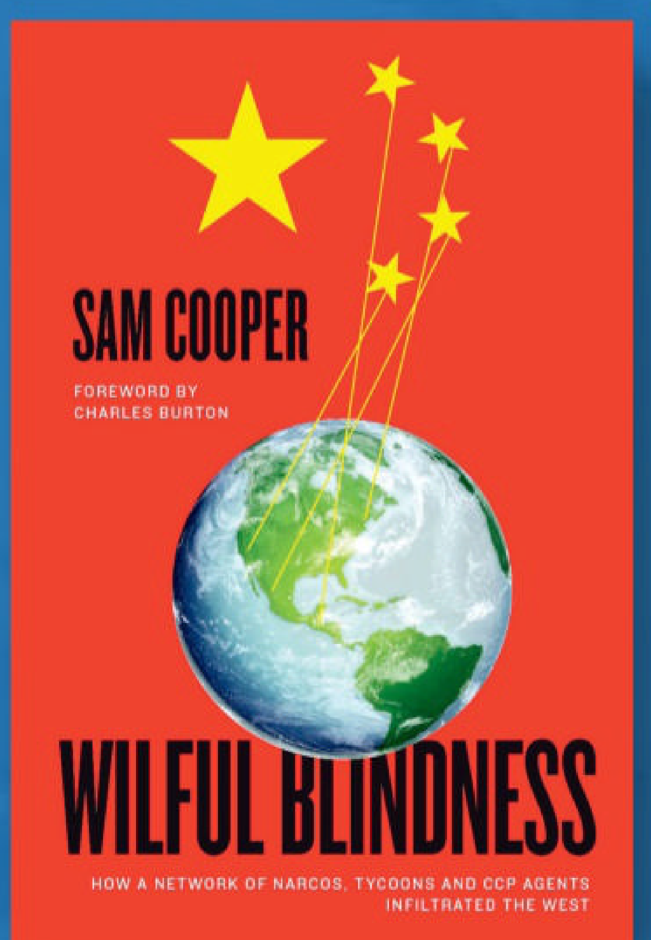

"Explosive revelations that expose our government's complicity with the Chinese Communist Party in undermining Canada's democracy and national security..."

— Charles Burton

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Whatever the Cost May Be

Preparing for the fight of our life

John Baglow

A Good War: Mobilizing Canada for the Climate Emergency
Seth Klein
ECW Press
464 pages, softcover, ebook, and audiobook

At this point, one should not have to set the scene for a review of Seth Klein's *A Good War*, yet the notion of a "climate emergency" still has an empty rhetorical flavour for far too many. The reality: Massive wildfires in Australia, the Amazon, and North America. Increasingly powerful hurricanes, so numerous that meteorologists run out of names. The rapid melting of Arctic ice. A measurable rise in sea levels. Road-melting summer highs. Accelerating extinctions, including what's been dubbed the insect apocalypse. These and other sobering developments are all now defining features of our planetscape. But no signal of crisis has been enough, so far, to make our government (and most others) shake off the political lethargy that's preventing the forceful action required to reverse course.

As those who have been paying attention know, we have dangerously little time. A near-perfect consensus of climate scientists tells us that we have about a decade to act before we slip into catastrophe, as the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change made abundantly clear in its 2018 special report. Simply to hold current atmospheric warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, we must halve global carbon dioxide emissions by 2030 and achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. And even with that rise, the IPCC report states, "climate-related risks to health, livelihoods, food security, water supply, human security, and economic growth are projected to increase."

The difficulties in actually doing something more than continually repeating the above statistics are overwhelming. The problems to be solved are complex, multi-faceted, and full of traps. They will require fundamental changes in our thinking, our political culture, and our economy. That's a steep hill to climb but, as Klein argues, not an insurmountable one. The worst obstacle is what he calls the "new climate denialism." Unlike the classic version — pushed by assorted ideological cranks and fossil fuel industry shills facing off against bona fide climate scientists — the new denialists concede that anthropogenic global warming is an actual thing. But their "unspoken defeatism infects and shuts down the real debate we so urgently need to have."

Klein, the former director of the British Columbia office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, cites a particularly ripe example of that stifling. Paul Hambleton, the CBC's director of journalistic standards, has argued that journalists should use "climate emergency" and "climate crisis" with extreme caution. The phrases, he explained in June 2019, "have a whiff of advocacy to them. They sort of imply, you know, something more serious, where climate change and global warming are more neutral terms."

If there's a problem within the national media, it's even more acute in the political sphere. As Klein observes, the Liberal government introduced and passed a climate emergency motion in mid-2019 — before reapproving the Trans Mountain expansion project the very next day, having already bought and paid for the existing pipeline. Justin Trudeau has repeatedly reaffirmed his support for Keystone XL (though, on his first day in office, the new U.S. president blocked further construction on that controversial pipeline, in which Alberta has invested $1.5 billion). And the Liberals' "net-zero by 2050" climate legislation, introduced in November 2020, is merely aspirational, lacking any penalties for non-compliance.

> "No signal of crisis has been enough, so far, to shake off the political lethargy."

At the provincial level, Rachel Notley imposed a carbon tax when she was the NDP premier of Alberta, even as she pushed for more pipelines and oversaw a 40 percent increase in greenhouse gas emissions from the development of the oil sands. Her successor, the United Conservative Party premier Jason Kenney, launched a McCarthy-style inquiry into "anti-Alberta energy campaigns." In Victoria, John Horgan's NDP government came up with a "Clean BC" climate plan, in late 2018, even as the premier promoted fracking and the natural gas industry.

While governments of all stripes palaver and obstruct rather than confronting the deadly reality of the crisis, Canada is the tenth-highest GHG emitter in the world and, per capita, the second-worst emitter of all the G20 countries: nineteen tonnes per person per year, more than two and a half times the group's average. Our emissions remain about as high as they were in 2005. Meanwhile, world GHG emissions continue to rise. Indeed, there is no reason to believe that the 7 percent decrease in energy-related emissions in 2020, due to COVID-19 shutdowns, is anything but temporary relief. (And as the International Energy Agency reported in January, emissions from inefficient yet increasingly popular sport utility vehicles continued to rise, even with the pandemic.)

Half-hearted, equivocal measures won't cut it, and the pun is intended.

That's why Klein proposes a profoundly different approach: to put Canada on a war footing, while mobilizing all levels of government and the Canadian population as a whole to fight. For him, this is much more than a facile military metaphor — it's the real thing.

To develop his argument, Klein recounts in detail how Canada mobilized for the Second World War, an impressive story in itself. After the so-called Phony War period, from September 1939 to April 1940, a time when much was said but little actually happened, the country finally came to grips with the Nazi threat when it became apparent that Germany would win the war. And once it had actually confronted the emergency, Canada punched well above its weight. Out of a population of 11.5 million, 1.1 million men enlisted, nearly half of whom served overseas. Some 44,000 died. Wartime production was prodigious, helmed by C. D. Howe, a man of extraordinary capacity who eventually became known as the minister of everything.

Private enterprise and an expanded public service, including numerous Crown corporations, ramped up production almost *ex nihilo*. It was a period of major innovation and job creation, as well as unprecedented productivity: our *matériel* output was fourth among the Allies, after the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union. And, thanks to sound transition measures, the postwar decades were years of prosperity.

The media played its part as well: it didn't circulate crude war propaganda, but it did keep citizens informed — while never pretending to be neutral in its coverage. Nazi sympathizers got no airtime to present "the other side."

A vital element of Canada's all-in commitment was the real sense that everyone was working together. There were enforced wage and price controls and a tax on excess profits. Social solidarity was built with the introduction of unemployment insurance and the family allowance. As Klein notes, inequality is "toxic" to the kinds of efforts that are once again required.

The overall point that Klein is making is that, in the face of a real emergency like the Second World War, Canadians can throw themselves into the struggle, make the sacrifices that are needed, and work together for a common

Flyover

People are in the news
for licking ice cream in the store and putting it back.
One is facing twenty years. The plane dips

like a warm spoon into the clouds
toward gridded subdivisions. In-ground pools
like marble slabs. Pedestrians

cross a wooden walkway
suspended over a large pit filled with construction beams.
My ears pop. As ever,

much of the populace
is employed in actual trades.
Then there are the "analysts"

manipulating symbols.
Lawyers and coders. I could sell a think piece
linking polyamory to housing costs.

It's hard to justify
a harsh sentence for the ice cream lickers
given the unmitigated contamination

of the future as a whole,
the hollowing out of so-called flyover country.
I should've taken the train.

I would've been a musician
if I had more talent and less good sense.
Each month I put a little bit away.

The commentariat is divided
over the fascist movement: a looming threat
or a stone in society's shoe?

I'm not sure where I stand,
but I'm looking at the situation from a distance.
I'm making a list.

Bardia Sinaee

Bardia Sinaee is a former assistant editor of the Literary Review of Canada. *His debut collection is* Intruder.

purpose. Instead of practising austerity, the government of the day can spend as required — and the economy will grow. In the same way, Klein argues, we can confront the climate emergency and do well at it.

◆

INDEED, THERE IS INCREASING POPULAR AWARENESS that the emergency is upon us. Even in Alberta, where 40 percent of our national GHG emissions are generated, 56 percent of the population is favourable toward a Green New Deal, when it's defined as a comprehensive set of measures to tackle both climate change and inequality. What is needed — and there are few signs of it at present — is resolute, imaginative political leadership so that we can achieve and sustain, as the IPCC puts it, "rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society."

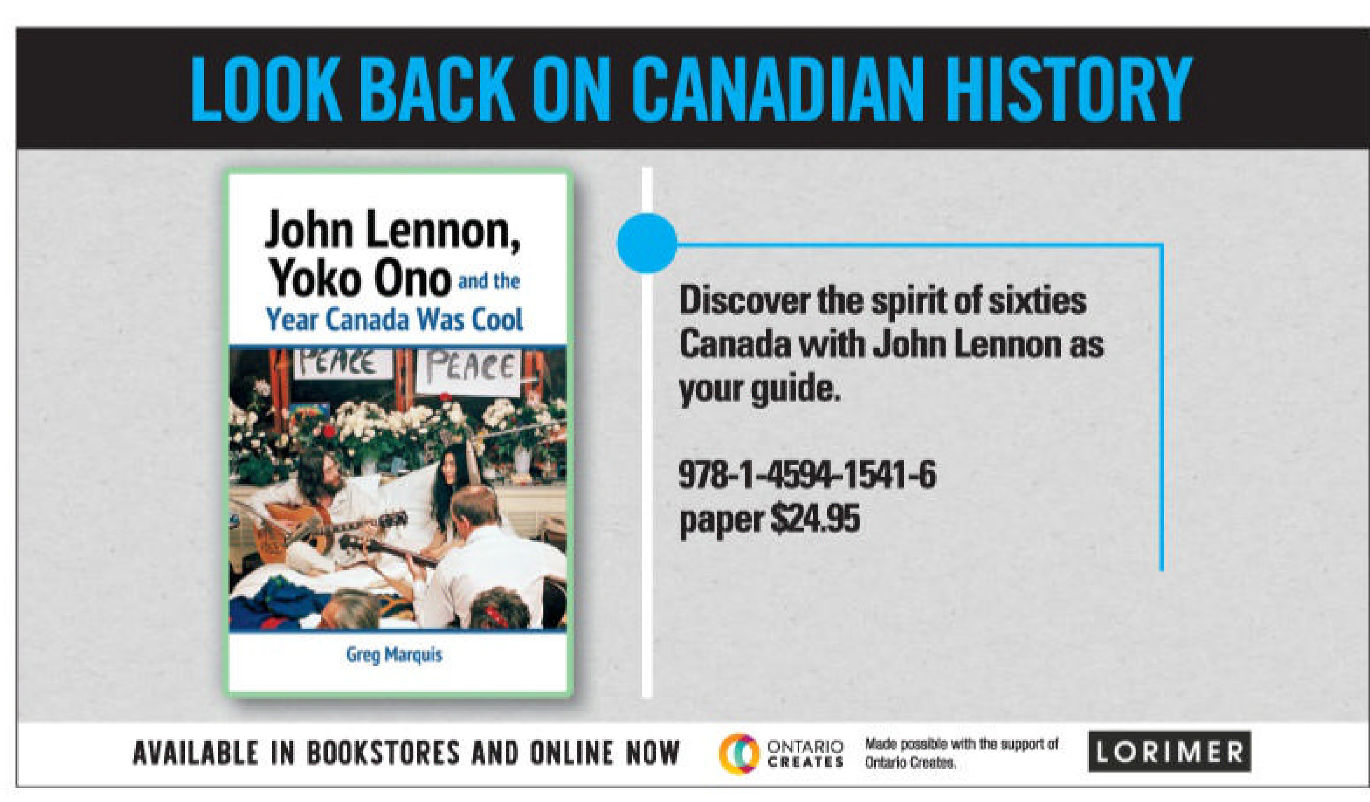
Moreover, doing too little will cost us much more in the not-all-that-long run. Klein cites Joseph Stiglitz, the economist and Nobel laureate, who has pointed out that, in the United States, 2 percent of GDP has already been lost to weather-related disasters and that direct costs to health have been in the tens of billions. "It makes sense," Stiglitz wrote in the *Guardian*, in 2018, "to spend money now to reduce emissions rather than wait until later to pay a lot more for the consequences."

Klein sets out in considerable detail how Canada should spend that money: massive investments in public transportation and green infrastructure, a rapid transition to green energy, major retrofitting programs, and extensive carbon capture projects. Tied to this environmental agenda would be measures to sharply reduce social and economic inequality. To be successful, these major changes would have to be supported by a whole-of-government approach at all levels, with legally enforceable target timelines. This program will all cost considerable amounts of money, but somehow that money always seems to be found in times of crisis (as, for example, during the COVID-19 pandemic).

Klein's proposals are entirely sensible once the premise of an emergency situation is accepted — and, at this point, it must be — but he concedes that a new transitional economy will not be successful with only empty promises of green "jobs, jobs, jobs." A transition plan must include clear individual paths to specific, high-quality jobs, with training and relocation costs thrown in. And we won't be flying blind: other countries, like Norway, Sweden, New Zealand, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, and the United Kingdom, are already far ahead of us. We can build upon their best practices.

Unlike his sister, Naomi, whose suspicion of top-down state leadership in this fight is clear in her recent books, Seth Klein clearly believes that a state-led mobilization is essential to meet the crisis. But his proposal does not preclude more democratic forms of participation, including protest as necessary; nor does it mean repeating the human rights violations that marred our achievements during the Second World War. Klein insists, for example, that Indigenous peoples, rightly wary of the state, must have a seat at the planning table, control over their own lands, and the right to develop their own environmental solutions — as many First Nations are already doing.

A Good War, as Klein points out at the beginning, is not a book about climate science. It's a readable set of suggestions — solidly rooted in our own history in Canada — for how to put out the fire that is rapidly consuming our house. As such, it is yet another solid contribution by yet another person who smells the smoke and sees the flames. But, as he would agree, the point is not to talk about the emergency in various ways but to end it. We have less than ten years to do so.



The Diarist

Making tracks in a new land

John Lownsbrough

The Diary of Dukesang Wong: A Voice from Gold Mountain
Edited by David McIlwraith; translated by Wanda Joy Hoe
Talonbooks
144 pages, softcover

Digging into the archives of a transformative period.

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IN AN ENTRY DATED "SPRING 1880," Dukesang Wong recorded in his diary, "I have decided to venture to that country they call 'the Land of the Golden Mountains.' The next ship that departs for those shores is the one which I shall be on. Because I cannot build upon my own land in this country, it is right that I should attempt to seek land over the ocean." In a subsequent entry, marked "Late Summer 1880," he confessed trepidation about his "wild and uncivilized" destination, where "people kill each other daily" and "all the business and the laws are controlled by white people, while we are not permitted to rule over our own actions." He wondered if there were less "barbaric" areas: "My life doesn't yet have the signs of impending death, and my family has not yet carried on its name. With no wife and children, my life has still to be lived, and I am curious what this new land will bring."

These words were written when Wong was in his mid-thirties. For more than a decade — the diary begins with entries from 1867 — he had been preoccupied with his family's honour and a tragedy that had blighted their name. Then he realized that, according to the straitened rules and regulations of the elite society into which he had been born, opportunities at home were scarce. Instead he pursued a belief that became a theme of many immigrant stories: that opportunities were brighter over the far horizon — in the Golden Mountains of the Pacific Northwest. Wong's introduction to "this new land" would be Portland, Oregon, but he eventually moved on to British Columbia.

All the while he kept a record of his observations, a chronicle of events and self-reflection, on a journey that led him to work on the Canadian Pacific Railway. It is a tale of terrible hardship and deprivation, compounded by the racism that Chinese workers experienced and the chillingly utilitarian attitude with which this new and barbaric land regarded them.

◆

THE DIARY OF DUKESANG WONG IS PRESENTED AS "the only known first-person account by a Chinese worker on the construction of the CPR." As such, its appearance is a welcome and signal event, one whose origins can be traced back to an undergraduate thesis submitted four decades ago by Wanda Joy Hoe, Wong's granddaughter. As a sociology student at Simon Fraser, she discovered her grandfather's diary in an archive and translated portions for her paper. (Hoe went on to have a career with UNESCO.)

Years later, the author and filmmaker David McIlwraith came upon the thesis and realized its importance. With Hoe's participation, and adding an introduction by Judy Fong Bates, he nurtured it along to publication, providing context and commentary to help fill in the gaps.

Some narrative gaps proved insurmountable. The archive in which Hoe found her grandfather's writings was located in a Wong Association branch that was later destroyed by fire (other branches still exist throughout North America). All that remains of the diary's original seven notebooks is those portions that Hoe originally transcribed with the aid of two uncles. We are thus left with the fragments of a life — a comment offered not as a complaint but with regret and also gratitude. Even with these fragments, we catch glimpses of a much broader canvas. We discover insights and intimations of an experience too long ignored by mainstream histories of a transformative period.

The extant diary starts with the upheaval that ultimately led to Dukesang Wong's decision to emigrate. His father, a magistrate north of Beijing, had weighed in on a land dispute that pitted two families against each other. His position on the matter prompted his shocking murder — at a banquet hosted by the family he favoured. And this crime brought shame on the victim's family. The trauma of the murder — Wong recalled his father's agony over several hours, his blackened fingernails indicating arsenic poisoning — was compounded by the social ostracism that derailed his own hope of finding employment within the imperial court.

For years, while earning a living as a tutor instead, he attempted in vain to clear his family name of scandal. At one point, he fell in love with one of his pupils, but he resisted the temptation to act on his feelings, on the grounds of social propriety. "As the tutor grew more and more attracted to his young student," McIlwraith writes, "his concern and anxiety about the attraction also grew. Like most of the young women of the period in China, Sai Ling had been betrothed in an arranged marriage." This is a diary that reveals a thoughtful man, whose occasional doubt and dismay were nonetheless superseded by strong self-discipline and a sense of duty.

Eventually, in 1879, Wong committed himself to a "little bride" named Lin, an infant thirty-five years his junior, following a tradition common to the patriarchal structure of imperial China. And that promise — of a wife and progeny to carry on the family name, bringing it honour and distinction — nudged his thinking toward a new life on distant shores. "Lin has been promised to me as my second wife," Wong wrote. "Ironic that I do not have a first, unless those brief moments with Su-Lin were first." He offered no further explanation, though Hoe told McIlwraith "that he was known to have had a first marriage, or cohabitation, in China, and that the relationship

produced a son." (Neither the first wife nor her son followed Wong to Canada.)

With his mandarin background and education, Wong came into contact with Christian missionaries in China, likely Jesuits. He enjoyed multiple discussions with one in particular: "The Englishman cannot have any classical knowledge whatsoever, but he does seem to be well versed in his philosophy." Later, Wong corrected himself: the man was, in fact, from France, "but in any case, also a barbaric land." While aspects of Christianity baffled Wong — "It is an interesting concept: my soul to be saved — but from what?" — he relished these conversations, even as he kept reminding himself to hold fast to Confucian principles. He saw Christian teachings as "just another point of view toward this life in which we all must exist, and it is certain, I think, that these lessons are about a good life of giving and helping other people." When Wong sailed to North America in 1880, he did so aboard a missionary ship.

In Canada, Wong emerged as a spokesman for, and teacher to, his fellow countrymen. It disheartened him to learn that great social upheavals in his native China had sparked anti-Western xenophobia. This enmity was juxtaposed with the realities of anti-Chinese sentiments in North America, including low wages and a head tax. Even the Japanese were treated better, he complained. (However, as McIlwraith points out, had Wong not died in 1931, at the age of eighty-six, he might have witnessed the shameful internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War.)

◆

IN AN ENTRY DATED "SUMMER 1886," WONG remarked how the "fresh new land" he had long pondered "is a land already full of sadness. The people are beginning to pursue a search for gold. They say it glitters everywhere, and men die for it. It is a peculiar set of values, strange to my humble limited experience, where men fight one another for it."

What is remarkable about the man who emerges in these entries is the equipoise he somehow managed to maintain even in the face of privation and the tumult of his surroundings. For all his doubts, he displayed a steadiness born of fidelity to philosophical principles, to the "order of life," and to restoring honour to the house of his father, a restoration possible only when he finally married Lin and started a family.

"It is hard, this labouring," Wong wrote of his time on the railroad, "but my body seems to be strong enough. The people working with me are good, strong men. There are many of us working here, but the laying of the railroad progresses very slowly. It seems we move two stones a day! And they want this railway built across these high mountains, some two thousand miles!" Later, he decided to become a tailor and set up a business in New Westminster: "There is not enough ready-made clothing from China, and there are no tailors to cut the cloth in our manner. I will be able to earn some money, enough to bring Lin over to this land." She arrived, with her guardians in tow, toward the end of the 1880s. They married several years later, she a young teenager and he nearly fifty.

If one can praise Dukesang Wong for his dedication to what he considered his duty, one can certainly praise Lin for her equally hard-won adherence to it. Disease, a miscarriage — these were some of the early challenges that confronted her in British Columbia. But the couple had seven sons together and, finally, a girl, whom Wong declared "a great joy for all this house" in the diary's final entry, dated 1918: "She has come in my old age, a joyous sign, and she will be able to bring me pride, I know! It is good. Her brothers are men now, so she will be assured a good life. She will look after Lin when I leave these lands for the final journey homeward." The baby girl, whose anglicized name was Elsie, was the future mother of Wanda Joy Hoe. She lived until 1992 and was buried in Vancouver's Mountain View Cemetery, sharing a tombstone with her mother.

Hoe concluded her transcription of her grandfather's diary on an upbeat passage, which is perhaps understandable. But in an entry from 1901, Wong once again lamented the strife occurring in his homeland and his sense of alienation in Canada: "I have ceased to desire to return to my village, for I am now of this house, but I am also greatly saddened, for now I can only hope to be buried in a nameless land." One likes to imagine that somewhere in the diary's missing pages, he looked back on his life, gazing at his children and knowing he helped give them a name, in this "nameless land," that they can be proud of. ◢

Plastic Bag

Had I not seen
the white plastic bag
taking flight

from the neighbour's lawn,
a silent medusa
in the gelatin sky —

had I not seen it
flying by with
the night's clothing

only going home
to more plastic,
passing by

adulterous pigeons
eating from
our trite decay.

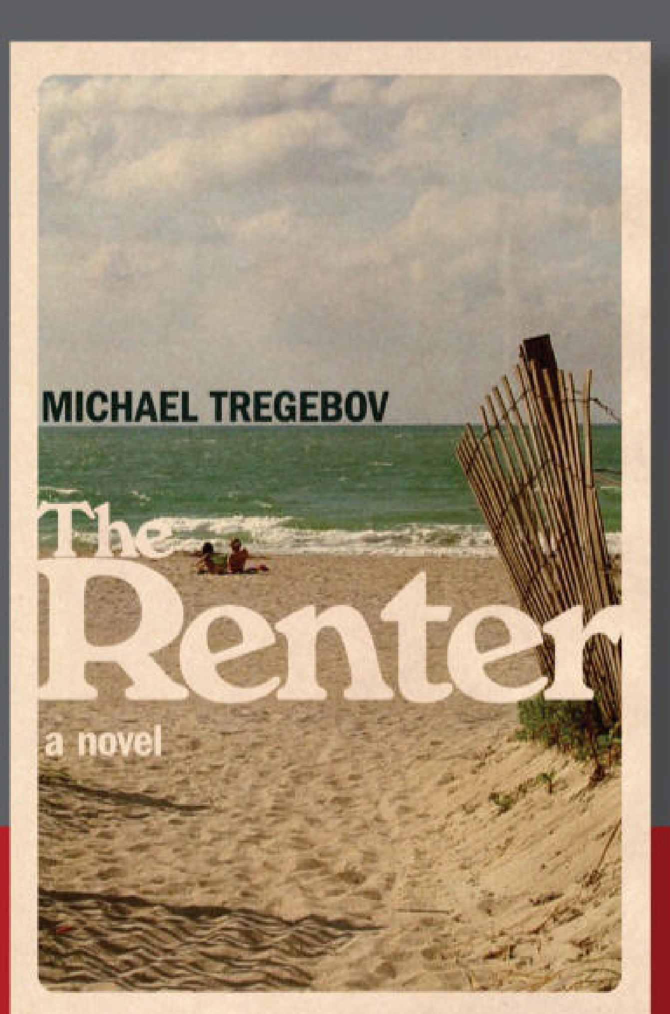
Had I not seen
the white plastic bag
swooping

something warm
from the frigid air of dawn,
I would've told

your little secret.

Tyler Haché

Tyler Haché is a poet from New Brunswick. He is working on his master's degree in English and creative writing at the University of Toronto.



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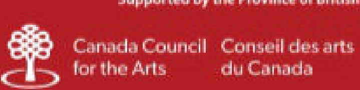

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Pack Together, Pack Apart

Down at the dog park

Dan Dunsky

During the last few months of her long life, we'd still take Scout to the park, where she'd meet up with her friends — Molly, Archie, King, Cooper, Pepper, Auden, Moose, and the rest of the canine crew. By this time, as the old lady of the dog run, she was given a lot of space, whether out of respect or, more likely, lack of interest, since she only occasionally made a half-hearted attempt to play.

She died in October at sixteen and a half (as with young kids, when you get very old, the quarter and half years matter). A husky-shepherd mix, she had come to us from Moose Factory, Ontario, as a five-month-old pup who had been found in a chicken coop. She was house-trained, so there had been at least some care, some sense that she was a pet to someone. Thanks to the tireless work of rescue organizations, she made the long trek south, like so many other northern dogs. Lucky for her and for us.

When we adopted her, our boys were eight and five. Now they are both grown and gone from home. So many of the memories I have of them over the past two decades include her, in my mind's eye: at baseball and hockey games, birthdays, the cottage. Even skiing, where she once ran up the snow-covered hill to find us. She was the best girl ever, and that's not just my opinion; it's objectively true.

Scout had a terrific life here in the city, in part because Toronto is such a great place for dogs. I'm not sure why that is; maybe it's a corrective to the Anglo chill that burrowed into this place for decades. Regardless, our four-legged friend was treated well pretty much everywhere she went. Shops welcomed her and gave her treats. They left water bowls outside to cool her down on hot days. The corner store around the block had her picture on the wall, and she was featured a couple of times in our local hardware store's Instagram feed (@dogs_of_hardware). People would frequently stop to pat her — especially young kids who thought she might be a wolf. And there was the park, where she went most days, usually twice a day, for nearly two decades.

Dog parks are a unique microcosm of urban life. They're local hubs where pet ownership provides the bond that leads to conversation and acquaintance. As in the '80s sitcom *Cheers*, these public settings aren't primarily about friendship (although some develop); they are more about social connection. New owners show up, and they become part of the pack, so to speak, while others move on, drift away, don't really stay in touch beyond a wave on the street or a brief hello and scratch on the neck.

Conversation at the dog park is pretty much what you'd expect. It's about everyday stuff. It's about our pets, of course, but also about our kids. About school. About work, music, movies, and Netflix. It's about neighbourhood events, apartment vacancies, and home renovations. It's health advice and book recommendations and helpful suggestions about aging parents. It's water-cooler talk without the water cooler, where people drift in and out, depending on whether they're picking up after their dog, stopping Duke from humping Maddie, or intervening in the rare fight that goes from zero to a hundred faster than the greyhounds Claire and Florence (some dogs' names have been changed to protect their owners' privacy).

But as the foul pandemic outlasted the spring, then the summer, then the fall of 2020, I noticed that the dog park became more and more important for many of us dog owners. Whereas our chats used to be mostly informal and light, there now seemed to be a real urgency to interact. Owners stayed longer at the park, often joining other groups of people when their initial socially distanced bubble dispersed. Conversations also became more personal.

Mimi's owner — with whom I had previously spoken only once or twice — confessed to being overwhelmed by working at home, or "living at the office," as she put it. She would describe the impossible routine of her day, with a young daughter to care for, and wonder how she'd deal with the demands being placed on her. People have regularly felt comfortable opening up to me — a willingness to listen has been part of my job as a journalist. But this kind of personal sharing, coming from someone I barely knew (I still have no idea if Mimi's owner is single or in a relationship), opened my eyes to some deep need to be heard as we all strained against a terrible year.

In early October, in one of my last trips to the park before Scout died, Happy's owner, a veteran high school teacher who usually keeps the conversation light, told me that he already felt as tired as he normally does in May. He said he didn't know how he was going to get through the year trying to figure out the government's constantly changing rules for schools or the mix of online and in-person "modalities."

Blaze's owner, meanwhile, wondered aloud if he wanted to even keep his job at all: while working from home and being around for his kids, he was reassessing his entire career. He didn't want "to spend more time on a treadmill" if he could help it. I haven't seen him for a while, so I don't know what he decided.

Diego's owner, whom I've known for years, opened up to discuss the challenges she was having with her daughter, and Rebel's owner confessed to "losing it" over a simple thing, her nerves finally frayed from months of digging deep to stay patient, as a damn virus turned her routine completely inside out.

Of course, it didn't take long for the common COVID exchange to begin with "How are you holding up?" or "How are you guys doing?" It was as if we were all trying to cope with reality by hearing how others were coping. Some version of "A day at a time" was a common answer. "This isn't forever" was another. A third was the recognition that many of us have it better than others. Based on my unscientific dog-park observations, young couples and younger families were especially interested in this style of exchange.

For others, the pandemic was a kind of thermostat, cranking up existing emotions. Teddy's owner started to linger at the park, even as the weather grew cold and the days grew short. She's an older woman who lives alone. It's hard not to imagine that this has been a lonely and difficult time for her, and that the park is one of the few places she gets regular contact with others. And I often think about Jack's owner, whose spouse has advanced cancer. What must he think, listening to people complain about having to wear a mask and keep a safe distance from one another? Even at the dog park, our narcissism can sometimes be breathtaking.

COVID-19 didn't create these connections and associations. It didn't encourage extroverts to be even more outgoing or invite introverts to exercise muscles they prefer to keep idle. But, paradoxically, given the way the virus spreads, it encouraged us to find ways of being more social, to share our concerns and check up on one another more than we previously had. As we were forced to consider our own well-being, we became more aware of the needs of others.

◆

I haven't been to the park since Scout died, so I wonder, now that the vaccines are rolling out and our collective patience is wearing thin, whether this intimacy has remained. Given the light at the end of the tunnel, has dog-park talk reverted to its more optimistic and lighthearted tone? Or have the changes I noticed last year remained, perhaps more important than ever? After all, we're still a long way from normal.

I'll find out soon enough. We just got a new rescue, whom we've named Bear. We hadn't planned to welcome another pet into our home so quickly, but truckloads of northern dogs continue to come south. We saw a picture of a face we liked, went to meet him, and couldn't say no. He's about a year old, eighty pounds, and big-hearted. So, if all goes well and he takes to his training, it won't be long before I'm back to the outdoor water cooler, grateful for the science that allows us to overcome this plague and for the connections these loving animals bring to our lives.

Fragments

When your mother can't remember your name

Katherine Leyton

An Alphabet for Joanna:
A Portrait of My Mother in 26 Fragments
Damian Rogers
Knopf Canada
344 pages, hardcover, ebook, and audiobook

Mothers can be at once entirely familiar and complete mysteries to their children. The women who name us and hold an almost unbearable power in shaping our identities are elusive. Certain facets of their selves and chapters of their histories are closed off.

As she opens her memoir, the poet Damian Rogers recalls the time her mother escaped from her nursing home in Buffalo, New York. Joanna has frontal-temporal-lobe dementia, and when the police brought her back, she was unable to say where she'd been. Rogers was asleep in her Toronto home; she didn't find out about the episode until the next morning. Where did her mother go? What did she do with those hours? Rogers can only speculate: "I am able to imagine my mother, and in my imagination I fill the holes in the stories of what happened to her. There are so many holes in the stories, and I am always filling those holes."

The incident serves as a broader allegory for their relationship. Even before the disease, Rogers was aware that she didn't entirely know her mother. "I used to feel that I knew the contents of her mind almost as well as the contents of my own," she writes. "In some ways, that was an illusion, of course; she kept secrets." As a young, single mother, Joanna was a fun and loving parent, but she hid parts of herself and her past. As her brain deteriorated, her memories and her words were taken from her, a process Rogers describes evocatively as "a large dark field filled with a flickering network of rapidly dimming lights."

Of course, *An Alphabet for Joanna* is also Rogers's story. "I make my life with my mother into a story," she writes, "and the story makes me." This self-consciousness is one of the most striking elements of this memoir. As the book jumps back and forth in time, from 2019 back to Joanna's life before her daughter's birth, Rogers pieces together memories, photos, letters, her mother's zippered notebooks, a conversation with her father (of which she provides a sort of transcript), and emails from acquaintances. While she periodically highlights the flaws of her sources, Rogers is explicit about her need to tell this tale. She states early on that she writes as much to force herself to stay present during her mother's decline as to retrieve the fragments of Joanna's past.

Originally from the Detroit suburbs, Joanna followed her high school boyfriend to Long Beach, California, where they were quickly married by a mail-order minister. She painted a rosy picture of her wedding — "blue jeans, wildflowers, love beads, sunset" — but there were problems. This period in Joanna's life held a number of mysteries. There remain gaps and opposing narratives that leave the reader, along with the author, maddeningly unsatisfied. "Whatever it was, it was bad," Rogers says. "My mother hinted throughout my childhood that she had lost herself in some way, and that she didn't really understand what had happened to her during this time. Doctors she saw afterward, she told me, suggested she had sustained a closed head injury, an injury she couldn't remember or name."

Moments that leave the reader wondering.

The man Joanna was married to is not Damian Rogers's father. Joanna met that man, as the story goes, when she showed up at his door hawking Avon products. In his words (and Rogers is careful to emphasize that this is *his* version), she was "fragile, emaciated, hollow-eyed." She looked like she needed help. When she returned to his house to deliver the Snoopy cologne decanter he'd ordered, he invited her in. She opened up to him, telling him that her husband was putting aluminum foil on the windows, that he thought the radio was bugged, and that he believed she was controlling his heartbeat with her breath. She didn't know anyone else in Long Beach. Rogers's father said that she could stay with him. So she did.

This was not Joanna's happy ending. The two fought; there were unresolved issues with her first husband — to whom she was still legally married — and there were more secrets. Rogers's father eventually sent Joanna back to her parents' house in Detroit. Joanna then informed him, at a rather late stage, that she was pregnant. He moved to Michigan and they tried the relationship again, but to no avail. Joanna returned to her parents and Rogers's father left. Damian didn't see him for several years, and neither was he a significant presence in her life growing up; they reconnected years later, though. His role within this narrative is to help fill in details about Joanna, who can no longer remember who he is.

After trying to piece together her early life, Rogers writes about her childhood in her grandparents' home, her memories of the first apartment she and her mother shared, and how they would sing together and listen to the Beatles. Rogers delves into her own life too: a gig at a fashion magazine in New York; falling in love with the musician who became her husband; moving to Toronto; publishing two poetry books; and her struggles to conceive her son, Levi. She writes about her relationship with her mother as a young adult, interwoven with scenes from after her mother's diagnosis: transitions between various assisted-living facilities; passing time in a nursing home by drawing together; long, emotional embraces at each parting; and bringing her young son to visit. Whether she was a moody adolescent or an adult reassuring her declining mother that the shapes she was colouring were superb, Rogers captures these scenes of intimacy with a seductive ease. "You're my beautiful baby," Joanna tells her on one visit, to which Rogers responds with a kiss on her mother's cheek.

◆

As parents age, there is an inevitable role reversal when the caregiver becomes the cared for. But it is the transformation of Joanna's personality that is especially heartbreaking. When her brain started to change, so did her perception of her only daughter. At one point, Joanna was convinced that Rogers was stealing money from her, so she made frantic calculations on the back of a photocopy of a photo of her daughter. The picture was creased and folded; in it, Rogers was beaming. When her mother made this accusation, Rogers was heavily pregnant. She visited Joanna's bank and discovered that her mother had been telling the staff that there was no baby, and that her daughter was trying to poison her. This paranoia recalls a moment

JULIE DE GRAAG, *MAANNACHT*, 1920; RIJKSMUSEUM AMSTERDAM

Artist Statement for Found Sounds at the Lake

I am surrounded by sounds of insects flapping at screens
trying to reach the porch where I sit and listen
to this fuss of wings in the bright light of a flush moon.
Across the lake a chorus of frogs improvise, and every so often

a loon wails a strange, abrupt cry — not the usual arousing melancholy,
but broken and crude. Sometimes seagulls join the shrill.
A whippoorwill whips persistently into the night, and a weird hum
of some unknown animal living low to the ground

undulates along the waterline. This acoustic paroxysm churns
the warm air to a frenzied pitch, then slackens; even insects
ease their winged blunders into the veranda's canopy.
In this brief lull I hear "snaps" in nearby scrub, more evidence

of a restless crowd out in the dark. And then it begins again,
a slow swell of cries as if by magnitude the moon could be coaxed
to burn more brightly, or maybe it's the shine that draws this
textured wall of animal calls from the bush. All of this has to do

with "god" I'm certain — the word, I mean. Out there lumbering
in shadows among roots and beasts is a word I know little about.
And yet this flux of belling and wood-note draws me
and everything else ineluctably toward the thing it names.

Michael Lithgow

Michael Lithgow is an associate professor of communications and media studies at Athabasca University. His new collection is Who We Thought We Were As We Fell.

earlier in the pregnancy when Rogers told her mother that she was having a boy. "That's good," Joanna replied. "Girls can be rivals for Daddy's attention." Rogers can't imagine her mother making such a statement before her illness, but she wonders if she might have thought it.

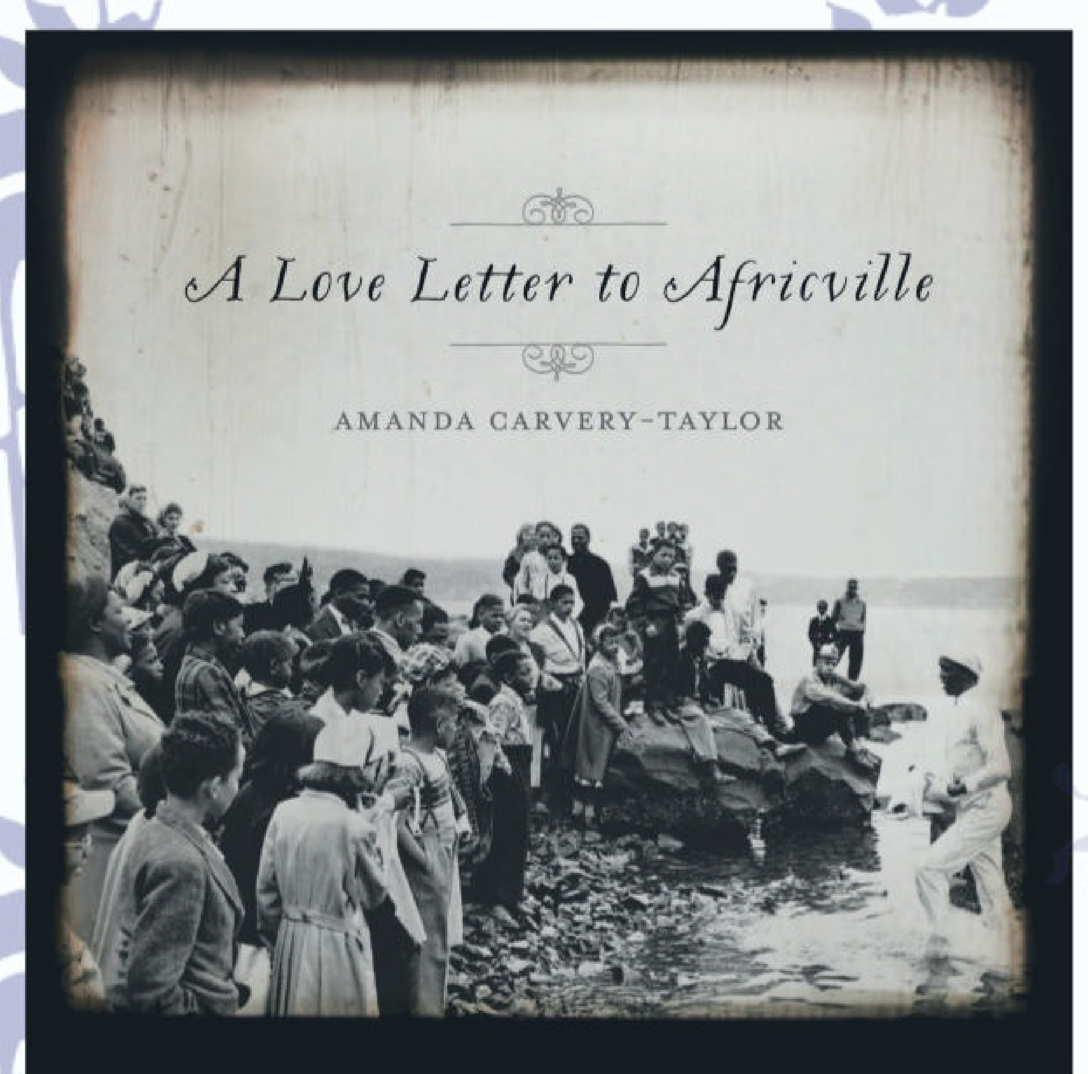
The toxic actions of men are at the centre of Rogers's reading of her mother's life. From Joanna's first husband, whose offences remain a mystery, to Rogers's father, who left when Damian was just shy of one (which prompted her to stop talking for a time), to one of Joanna's boyfriends, who tried to seduce Rogers when she was just thirteen, men leave behind them a wake of trauma. The darkest episode concerns Joanna's older brother, Allan, who repeatedly molested her as a child and eventually raped her. The book continually circles back to this abuse, as Rogers tries to gain insight into how it shaped her mother. Over the years, Joanna dropped hints about her brother before she revealed what had happened (she waited until Rogers was thirty). "Everything that's wrong with me is because of Allan," Joanna said. Later in the conversation, she added, "Promise me you won't write about this."

That the author includes her mother's request reads as an admission that memoir can be a self-serving form, even a betrayal. But the revelation also clarifies something for Rogers about her childhood — and speaks to her own sense of broken trust. Allan, who has since passed away, used to make her feel uncomfortable. He once told her that she looked like a young Brooke Shields. When she discovered the full truth about his character, she was angry that she'd been allowed to spend time in her uncle's home as an adolescent without her mother present. But Joanna insisted Damian was never in danger. "In a way this seems delusional, tied to the family's deep denial, but it did feel as if there was a force field separating me from my uncle, a force field he could not cross." The book skirts the role that women's silence and passivity plays in generational trauma. It's another moment that leaves the reader wondering, alongside Rogers, what Joanna was thinking.

◆

ROGERS'S ATTEMPTS TO UNDERSTAND HER mother are ultimately, and perhaps predictably, unsuccessful. There comes a point when Joanna cannot even remember her daughter's name. Rogers is left with more questions, including whether she will develop the disease herself — whether she will be undone in this way, and what it will mean for the people who love her.

Near the end of the book, she describes a visit to her mother's extended family in Montana, when she went through old family photos and came across a picture of her great-great-great-grandmother. The photo once belonged to her great-grandmother Ivy, who had written on the back "my mother's mother." Rogers would like to know the woman's name, but none of her relatives could tell her. She speculates that Ivy hadn't known either. "This woman was a ghost to Ivy, just as Ivy is a ghost to me," Rogers says. "Ghosts all the way back."



A Love Letter to Africville

By Amanda Carvery-Taylor

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The Prophet

Atwood's poetic voice

Shannon Hengen

We chatted at a conference several decades ago. As we had tea on a patio after her poetry reading, I made bold to ask if she would be publishing a new collection sometime soon. In her distinctively pointed voice, without hesitation, she replied with a grin: "No. I've read the late Tennyson." Yet a couple of volumes of poems have appeared since then, and now *Dearly* has come out, quickly reaching the bestseller lists.

Like her immediately recognizable speaking voice, the persona of Margaret Atwood's poems is unique. But unlike her speaking voice, it's a persona that shifts over time. The latest work predicts and admonishes, though subtly. This is somehow a wiser voice than before — still bracing but winsome. Put down your Tennyson and pick up *Dearly*.

In the opening sections, we sense we're sitting with her in the twilight. It's fall. We're sipping Laphroaig. We hear the new persona first when she recites the introspective opening piece, "Late Poems," and then laugh out loud at "Everyone Else's Sex Life." The shifts in tone from ominous to playful remind me of my later meetings with her.

◆

In 1999, Clare Coulter mounted an adaptation of Atwood's *Good Bones* at the Tarragon Theatre, in Toronto. I was teaching my "Atwood's Short Fiction" course at the time, at Laurentian University in Sudbury, and decided to take my small class to the show. I let the author know where we were having lunch before the performance, and she agreed to join us. It was around the time of her birthday, and my students decided to bake her a cake, which we carted down Highway 69 in the back of our van. As I introduced her to the group, she imitated how, as she got out of her taxi, the driver had said of our chosen café, "That's not a great place to go into alone, ma'am." Perhaps he could sense she was about to get chocolate frosting all over her hands.

A decade later, in 2008, Atwood came to Sudbury to celebrate her November birthday with a fundraising dinner hosted by the Laurentian English Department. I recall the spontaneous ovation in an overcrowded room as she walked in and the endless string of fans who queued up after dinner to have a book signed — to each of whom she spoke attentively. She celebrated her birthday with us for the next six years, and the funds from those hugely popular gatherings went to social causes she supports: ecology, Indigenous learning.

Her partner, the convivial Graeme Gibson, accompanied her on three of the trips. Together we toured Nickel City, ate Timbits, explored the couple's preferred tastes in Scotch, swapped stories. Once, over lunch, she relayed how, when visiting her late friend Chief Harry St. Denis, at Wolf Lake First Nation near Témiscaming, Quebec, she brought about hilarity with her imitation of the Queen.

She met with undergraduate students on each visit. Any rumour or misapprehension we might have had of a sharp tongue was displaced by the patience and encouragement she showed them unfailingly. And now when I read this new volume of poems, I hear that patient and encouraging Atwood alongside the octogenarian seer who refuses to look away from the real: her decline, ours, the planet's.

◆

Atwood's fiction forces us to look closely at where we're going, and for that we hold her in awe. To properly describe the range of voices in her many novels is a mighty task indeed. But even a selective glance at those seventeen books, not to mention eight collections of short fiction, helps us approach the poetry.

I bought her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, at the wonderfully named Canada Book and Drug in Regina, not long after it was published in 1969, starting decades of reading and writing about an author who seemed to want to teach me something urgently. While I have loved and appreciated countless writers over the years, I have never sensed any of them except Atwood to be speaking directly to me. That is madness, of course. But considering the astounding popularity of her fiction, that madness must be shared around the world.

> "This is somehow a wiser voice than before — still bracing but winsome."

Marian MacAlpin, of that debut novel, ignores her distrust of her fiancé and boredom with her work and her co-workers to the extent that she becomes anorexic, then cannibalistic, making a cake in the shape of a woman for her bewildered partner. Atwood the novelist seemed to be shouting at the docile young women of my generation to alter the script — to rewrite it, in fact. But how? And why?

The unnamed narrator of her 1972 novel, *Surfacing*, no less numb and passive than Marian MacAlpin and having ignored an abortion, similarly enacts her own near-death, in this case by drowning. Then she ditches her companions and eats hallucinogenic plants alone in the remote northern bush. Is that how we young women should learn to change the story?

Skip ahead to the hugely successful *The Handmaid's Tale*, from 1985, whose Offred and friends failed to see the signs of encroaching tyranny around them in their supposedly liberated lives before the fundamentalist coup. Again, Offred is frighteningly and obviously one of us. But a slight shift happens here: by the end of this speculative work, the central character shows a glimmer of courage. Being forced by the savage power of the regime, she overcomes her passivity and acts in solidarity with other resisters to survive. (I was once with a group of critics who joined Atwood on a tour of French universities, where she addressed large lecture halls full of students preparing for their national exams, which included *The Handmaid's Tale* that year. We could all feel their deep regard for her and her prescient voice.)

Solidarity with others is important. In *The Robber Bride*, from 1993, the villain Zenia certainly reads signs and acts to survive but at great cost to the three more familiar Atwoodian characters. Zenia dies and the others form a friendship that has a hint of solidarity.

The trio of speculative novels published in this century started with *Oryx and Crake* in 2003. The main character, numb and passive, is now a man, which does not feel like progress. Beyond those three books comes *The Heart Goes Last*, in 2015, with male and female characters equally, and chillingly, clueless. They don't figure things out. They don't join with others to resist. They end badly.

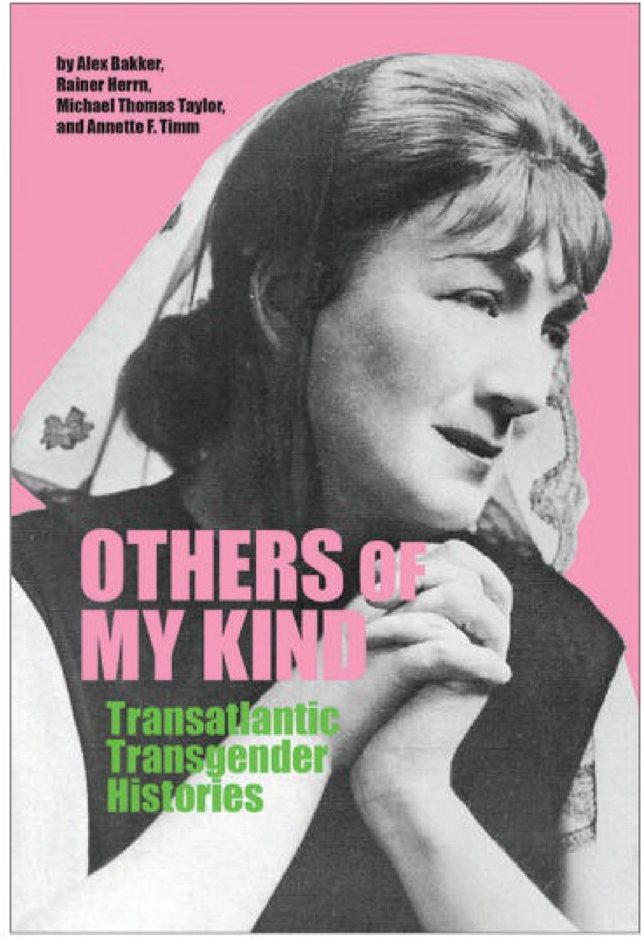
Most recently, the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* has the ruthless, brilliant Aunt Lydia as its protagonist. In *The Testaments*, co-winner of the Booker Prize in 2019, Atwood changes the storyline dramatically. But at what cost? Aunt Lydia acts alone. Is there solidarity anywhere in this novel? Is it effective? Is anybody happy?

◆

Margaret Atwood is not and has never been the poet of happiness. Prophets rarely are. But she has been a wise voice throughout her twelve volumes of poetry. Unlike her voice in prose — devoted as it is to plot lines and to whether they are inexorable — her poetic voice is sensual. No less the teacher as a poet than she is as a writer of prose, she nevertheless morphs into a lyricist, appealing to us through our senses. A comparison: if Atwood's prose is like a recipe for, say, bread, then her poetry is the aroma of it baking.

Atwood invokes stories from fairy tale, myth, history, ordinary life, the natural world — any text with the power to offer guidance — and tells

Transforming Transgender History



OTHERS OF MY KIND: Transatlantic Transgender Histories

Alex Bakker, Rainer Herrn, Michael Thomas Taylor, and Annette F. Timm

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298 pages, 186 illustrations
8.5 x 11 inches
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This is the story of a group of transgender people on both sides of the Atlantic who changed the course of history. Through letters and photographs they created networks of affirmation and trust. By advocating for themselves within the medical system, they influenced doctors and authorities like Magnus Hirschfeld, Harry Benjamin, and Alfred Kinsey. Richly illustrated in full colour, featuring many never-before-seen photographs, this is an exciting reconsideration of trans history. It is essential reading for anyone who feels the powerful and complicated pull of the past.

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them through the experience of one discerning voice. Her skill with the various meanings and sounds of words has not diminished over time: *Dearly* certainly attests to that. Her voice remains strong. It's the persona that has changed.

From 1966 to 1986 — twenty years — Atwood published nine books of poems. The last three books have come out over a quarter of a century. Why, having been put off by the late Tennyson, does she continue to write poetry at all? To witness and document that inescapable change?

At twenty-seven, she published *The Circle Game*, where the voice senses menace everywhere. Vulnerable, she is also herself dangerous, unlike in the latest poems published at eighty-one, where her vulnerability has no defence. In a sequence of seven short pieces in *The Circle Game*, she says: "Leave my evasions / alone / stay in the borders / I've drawn." It ends with "what you destroyed / with your transient hands // you did so gently / I didn't notice at the time."

At forty-two, Atwood published *True Stories*, a remarkable volume: "The true story is vicious / and multiple and untrue." Brutal scenes of human depravity mix with the act of teaching a child to spell — "how to make spells." What is the power of words against the power of hatred and brute force?

Seasons figure in her every poetry book, less often summer than fall or winter. Attend to the passage of time, this persona admonishes. Attend to memory, especially its decline. Reflections on presence and absence recur increasingly throughout the body of work, absence being especially poignant in the latest. Only a lyricist as skilled and practised as Atwood can write movingly about absence, which is — to cite one apt metaphor — as elusive as the wind.

If the seer's voice in her novels tells us repeatedly to read the signs and to act, its poetic counterpart speaks eloquently to the subtler value of being present. She witnesses the decline and deaths of parents, often repeating the insight first shared in *True Stories*: "Witness is what you must bear."

At fifty-six, Atwood published *Morning in the Burned House*, with a complete section devoted to the death of her father — her memories and dreams of him, her helplessness. Here she speaks of the wind as "nothingness / in motion, like time. The power of what is not there." This persona is present for her dying father, and at his death she feels his absence keenly. Against any of the forces over which we have little control, especially time and decline, words offer no defence. She chronicles that truth by being present, bearing witness.

When she published *The Door*, in 2007, Atwood was sixty-seven. In this volume, the speaker is present for her mother's death and asks, "What can I possibly tell her? / *I'm here.* / *I'm here.*" Is that enough? Poems about poetry and about the power of words to touch what is vital appear in *The Door*, as they do throughout her poetic oeuvre. She describes poets as having "the irritating look / of those who know more than we do." But "if you try for a simple answer" to what they know, "they pretend to be crazy, / or else drunk." She also considers, as she does throughout her career, the study of sexual and other politics.

In two war photo poems, she describes one "dead beautiful woman" among "other dead people scattered around / . . . left in the wake of frightened men / battering their way to some huge purpose / they can't now exactly remember." Does her image lead the speaker into "despair" and "helplessness" or "into the heart of prayer"? Yes, Atwood the poet occasionally cites prayer, again asking what its power might be.

Dearly brings us into absence most skillfully. Her partner of many years has died, leaving "the shape of an absence / in your place at the table." She asks of all the dear ones, "Where are they? / Where? Where? After a while / You sound like a bird. / You stop, but the sorrow goes on calling." In "Songs for Murdered Sisters," a seven-poem cycle, she mourns women lost to stories they have not had the power to shape — not unlike her early fictive characters. And she mourns her own powerlessness: "I was too late, / Too late to save you."

The "Plasticene Suite" of nine poems catalogues our alarming waste and brings together Atwood's wry and wise voices in a kind of lyric chorus. I imagine her reading these poems aloud, demonstrating that her skill with the sound of words is as exceptional as in the earliest poems. About a baby bird in the Midway Islands, lying dead from eating plastic, she observes "this glittering mess, / this festering nestwork." In the next poem, "Editorial Notes," she quotes an editor of her work who suggests that she "pull back somewhat / from exhortation and despair," about which she subtly concludes, "There is some danger in this."

The seventh poem in the suite evokes a recent news item about a whale carrying her dead calf — "So big and sad" — for three days. The whale mourns her baby, the victim of "toxic plastic." Repeating "so big and sad," the speaker declares "something must be done" and asks, "Will we decide to, finally?" As we do nothing, our use of plastic makes us increasingly absurd, with our "(beloved twistable / pea-green always dependable / ice-cube tray . . .)."

The menace around the speaker of Atwood's earliest poems is now much more obviously and strikingly the speaker herself. Like her, we are "the lobotomized," who "drink martinis and go on cruises" while "the world fries." The plangent voice is reflecting on loss — the title poem an elegy on "an old word." She tells us, "I miss you all dearly."

Reading Margaret Atwood's poetry has sharpened my perceptions for fifty years, helping me conjure that space between despair and wonder, the chill of betrayal and the warmth of love. As I age — as we all age — we need her to continue to sit with us in the twilight. We need the late Atwood.

Inspirations

The Circle Game
Contact Press, 1966

True Stories
Oxford, 1981

Morning in the Burned House
McClelland & Stewart, 1995

The Door
McClelland & Stewart, 2007

Dearly
McClelland & Stewart, 2020

Returning

The wind on this hill overlooking
the city is carrying the longing
you've tried to forget,

aching to give it back to you.

In the distance, amber light
is filling the blind windows of houses.
Soon, you'll be the only traveller
in this place without a home.

Even the birds will have
gone to sleep, sewn into the thick
skin of branches;

the crickets awake
within their green walls.

A few minutes
from now, you'll be back
on the path,

your name left buried
deep in the ground, the sound
of it reaching through roots and stones

as you return to the neighbourhood
you've abandoned, the family
that doesn't know

you're each of these shadows
you'll leave to embrace them;

the darkest places
where you've been lost.

Margo Wheaton

Margo Wheaton is the author of The Unlit Path behind the House. *Her latest collection is* Wild Green Light, *co-authored with David Adams Richards.*

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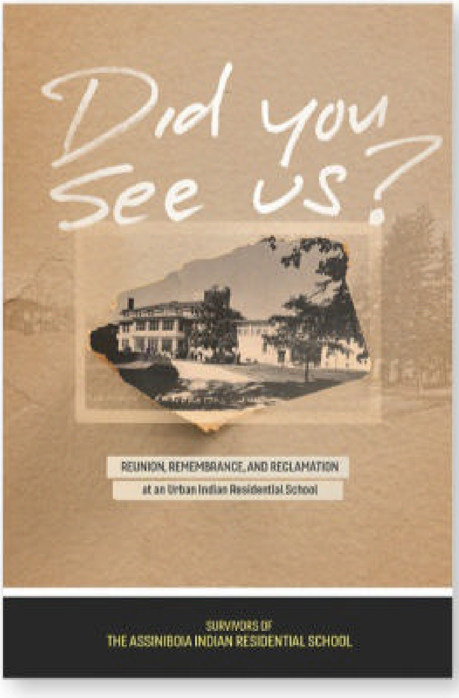
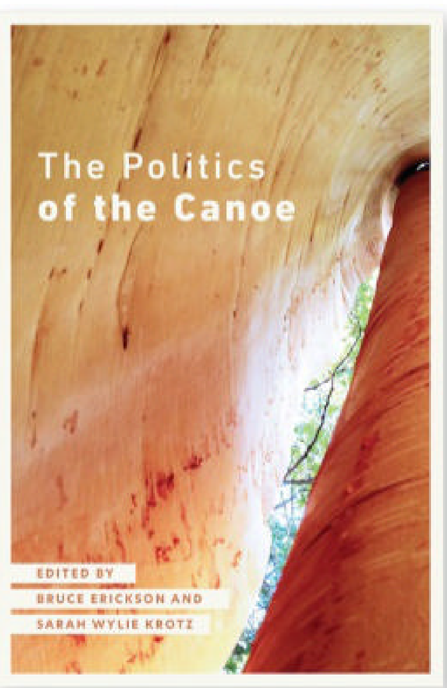
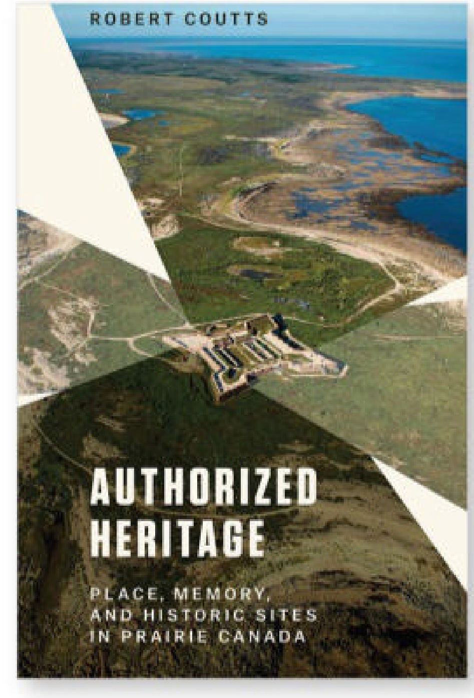
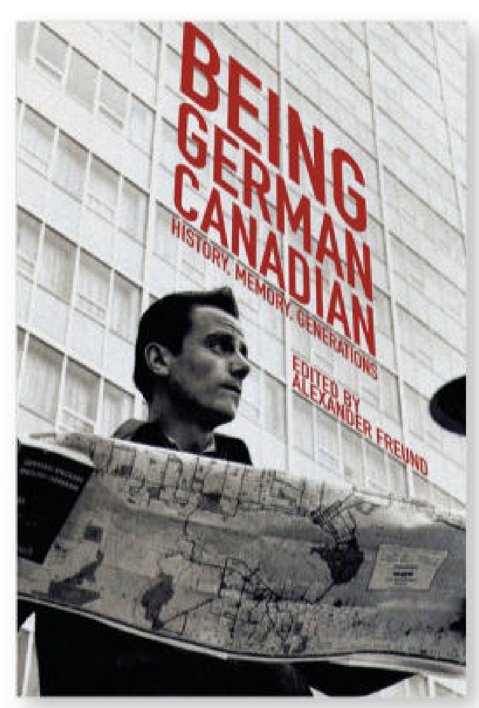
Fresh Titles for Spring 2021









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On the Rocks

Peter Unwin's new novel

Larry Krotz

Written in Stone
Peter Unwin
Cormorant Books
256 pages, softcover

Peter Unwin's *Written in Stone* begins at the end. Linda Richardson is driving an aging Westfalia van on one last journey from Toronto to Northern Ontario to scatter her husband's ashes. Years before, when she first met Paul Prescot, he was "a sullen older man who cast an atmosphere of sullen disapproval." He approached her at a party and asked if she was any good in a canoe — along the way, he explained the etymology of the word and quoted T. S. Eliot (he even inquired if she got the reference). Despite the shaky start, she agreed to go with him. Is this a story of identity? Or is it a send-up of pretensions? Either way, Linda and Paul come together as a pair of restless souls paddling along the Grand River.

Their marriage has its difficulties. There are fights and infidelities, but also tenderness, and a sense of the two of them against the world. Linda is younger, thoroughly urban, and has a master's degree in English (so, yes, she did get the Eliot reference). After slipping into "a bohemian half-world of theatre, ritual, and drinking too much," she ends up undervalued and dissatisfied as a proofreader for gardening catalogues. Paul has a binary view of humans: you are either an indoor or an outdoor person. He despises the modern world and immerses himself in his semi-academic career researching Indigenous rock paintings. He writes several titles on the subject, including *Pictographs, Petroglyphs and Paradigms of the Apocalypse*, and is, in his own words, "the world's leading authority on aboriginal rock art, east of the Rockies."

Bored with work, Linda fixates on the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*: "Everything real happened in those books. Only there." She plans to read every volume before she dies. The volumes were gifts from her late father, perhaps to "give her a spine. Many spines." But within them, she sees only stories of men and death, as she obsessively searches out the most misanthropic accounts.

Together, Linda and Paul set up competing stories of Canada as they try to relate to the land and its complex past, as well as to each other. "History. You can't live without it," Linda's father used to say. Of course, living holds the true meaning.

Pictographs are the crux around which the story turns. Unlike the cave art in France or Spain, which dates back tens of thousands of years, the paintings at places like Agawa Rock, on Lake Superior, are from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Yet, as writers such as Louise Erdrich have pointed out, "there is no completely accurate way to date rock paintings." Her non-fiction work *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* — which could serve as an alternative title for *Written in Stone* — tours the land of her ancestors and provides a sensitive, intelligent means of experiencing images that remain shrouded in mystery. For Erdrich, understanding, especially through a Western, codifying gaze, isn't necessarily something that can or should be obtained: "The rock paintings are alive. This is more important than anything else that I can say about them." Similarly, Paul sees the pictographs he visits as "living things, like books. Living books"— even as he seeks to discern their knowledge. He interprets them at one point as "giving the finger to Cartesian duality." But it is Linda who wonders if this wisdom could be hers: "It was out of reach, but close." She doesn't try to possess it; instead, she regards it as a pull, a questioning: "Beneath her hand she felt the rock still warming. Was it hers? Could it possibly be hers, a wisdom that seemed suddenly everywhere? What had she been given to know and to keep and to hold?"

The paintings are living things.

The Indigenous view within the novel is more cut and dried. Paul's guide on his research trips, a laconic character named Joe Animal, observes simply, "What they drawed is what they dreamed." At one point, Paul asks him to look at three rust-coloured lines stacked horizontally. "That first line," Joe says. "You know what that is, right?" Paul admits that, no, he doesn't, and "neither do you." Joe tells him it's the Canadian National Railway. The second line is the Canadian Pacific Railway. And the third? "The Trans-Canada Highway," Paul answers confidently. "The Highway of Hope." Joe shakes his head and grins. "The third one is the end of the world."

◆

Written in Stone is a multi-layered book that bears rereading. It's also a book that has to be grappled with. Unwin does not dispute that European settlers can relate to the land, nor does he ignore the endemic difficulties. He brings up Franklin's ill-fated expedition and the Jesuit missionaries who went mad from starvation. A dystopian mood pervades the novel, his ninth: starlings fly into windowpanes and die; churches catch fire and burn down. Modern urban life is noisy and banal, while the wilderness carries an edge of magic that is more a marker of uncertainty than it is a happy escape.

From Kenora to Parry Sound, Northern Ontario is rendered evocatively. Along the north shore of Lake Huron, there are rocks, trees, and animals, but also the grim debris of settlement: "rusted air compressors and miles and miles of frost fencing, the crushed packages of takeout joints, empty cigarette packs that skidded the pebbled shoulders of the highway." The book's cover blurb prepares readers for a narrative that "goes beyond the surface acknowledgments of settler impacts, and exists on the border of two solitudes, where the known and unknown cannot be separated, where mythology and reality are one, and where an old and inaccessible knowledge holds the means to a possible reconciliation." It is this, but not entirely.

The possibility of parody always lurks in the background of this novel. It's difficult to know how to accept it. Paul could be the type of person — one many of us know — who embraces a different culture and then expounds on it tediously. But Unwin plays him straight — that is, until Paul's rather farcical end, in which he perishes in a remote cove, on the equivalent of a vision quest, from an infected tooth. The narrative does not presume to take a theoretical bent beyond its protagonists' existential searches. However, the author does ask implicitly about world view. Does yours (like your religion) help you live? Are you at peace? Does it trouble you? Will it overwhelm and destroy you? These are the urgent questions that the book raises. And throughout, the enigmatic rock paintings provide a motif, unsettled and unsettling. Close, but just out of reach.

CHAD FENNELL; FLICKR

Home Sweet Unhomely

The latest from André Alexis

Spencer Morrison

The Night Piece
André Alexis
McClelland & Stewart
384 pages, hardcover, ebook, and audiobook

At first, Geoffrey Morehouse, a federal clerk in the 1980s, resists the occult contagion that has overtaken his cubicle-hived floor at Transport Canada. His fellow bureaucrats have been voraciously reading a mysterious red book, with troubling results. They have begun speaking in fragments, omitting the words "I," "eye," and "aye," and sticking out their tongues. The pressure to conform mounts. Everyone else has read the book — why not Geoffrey? Is being lizard-like really so bad?

This strange scenario crystallizes many of the strengths of André Alexis's collection *The Night Piece*. For one, there's the sheer imaginative gymnastics required to conceive this premise and the narrative twists and turns that unspool from it. There's the deft mining of voice for comedy: Geoffrey's deadpan account, its tone timid and pedantic, jars ironically with his unnerving plight. There's likewise the gentle satire of bureaucratic Ottawa, a motif that binds several of these stories.

Especially striking, though, is Alexis's use of a plot derived from the ostensibly low-culture genres of horror and fantasy as a substrate for high-culture philosophical rumination. Geoffrey eventually resolves to pretend he's read the mysterious tome. He imitates his co-workers' speech and mannerisms and takes a copy of the book home, opening it tentatively. Even this scant exposure sparks recurrent nightmares featuring an eerie figure whose nationality echoes the two words — "Norwegian roads" — that Geoffrey reads. In what ways has the text infiltrated his mind? Is the Norwegian a spectre of the author or something else? Geoffrey eventually concludes that "the red book is not a book at all. It is another mind. It is not another mind in the benevolent sense. It is another mind like a virus. What I mean is: if I were foolish enough to read the red book, I would become the mind within it." From the sedateness of cubicle life and the surrealness of nightmares we are catapulted into the loftiness of the seminar room, there to debate the relationship of author to reader and text to mind.

◆

To *The Night Piece*'s credit, the philosophizing arises from the plot organically and unobtrusively, enriching rather than overwhelming it. It's a literary skill that Alexis, best known for *Fifteen Dogs*, winner of the 2015 Giller Prize, has been honing for decades. This volume collects stories from across his career, spanning his 1994 debut, *Despair and Other Stories of Ottawa*, 2010's *Beauty and Sadness*, and the 2013 novella *A*, along with several new ones. At its best, Alexis's writing channels the high-minded otherworldliness, not to mention the unnerving strangeness, of Poe, Calvino, and Borges. These propulsive tales unfold events in the manner of fables, elaborating weighty themes — the nature of our minds, the existence of divine powers — upon the thread of fantasy.

We see this fabular quality in "Cocteau," named for the French author. (A few story titles are names of writers from whom, presumably, Alexis draws inspiration.) Here, a mediocre poet takes the job of caretaker of an abandoned — and, we learn, haunted — tower in a small Ontario town. A ghostly presence visits him overnight, operating as a muse whose poetry the caretaker transcribes and publishes under his own name. As the poet's fame grows, admirers swarm the town, desiring a clearer understanding of the verses. From a tale of demonic possession, knotty aesthetic questions gradually materialize. What, if any, power does a text draw from its author's life? What relationship exists between celebrity and craft? (Similar questions animate *A*, a satire of Toronto literary culture involving Atwood and Ondaatje, as well as a skewering of David Gilmour.)

> "The gentle satire of bureaucratic Ottawa binds several of these stories."

Another of the collection's standouts, "Horse," probes the relationship of mind to body through a horror story involving a mad scientist. The scientist rents the upper floors of the narrator's home and eventually recruits him as a guinea pig for an experiment in which the scientist assumes diabolical control of the man's movements. Watching from afar as his body treks around Ottawa, the narrator experiences a gulf between his consciousness and his flesh: "I have a tendency to speak of my (so-called) mind as 'I,' but that's not exactly what I felt. My body was 'I' as well. The constant unfolding of images, words, and desires that I take to be consciousness was, for the first few days, bifurcate."

Not every story traffics in the fantastic, gothic, and grotesque. "Kuala Lumpur" poignantly relates a bereaved son's struggles during his father's wake as it descends into pandemonium. One of *The Night Piece*'s most memorable narratives, "The Third Terrace," unfolds a noirish revenge drama that takes place in a world identical to ours, save that hand porn and hand prostitution — in which customers watch especially shapely hands rub oils across various fabrics — are booming industries.

In an afterword to the volume, Madeleine Thien evocatively likens reading Alexis's writing to the sensation of walking on ice. We feel ourselves supported only "by a surface about to give way." The image is apt. These stories often plunge us — drastically, suddenly, with a crack — into new, darker worlds, with all the terror and chill of falling beneath the ice. Yet easily overlooked amid the otherworldly horrors are the recognizable horrors of deceased parents and fractured marriages, as Alexis weighs fantasy against reality, one sorrow against another.

A clue to the wellspring of loss that permeates *The Night Piece* lies in the surname of the aforementioned bureaucrat: Geoffrey *Morehouse*. Throughout, characters seem deprived of, and in need of, a fortified sense of home, of homeliness. They lose homes, inherit empty and desolate ones, and rent them out to strangers. But the experience of being unhoused takes more expansive, figurative forms too. Alexis, who moved to Canada from Trinidad with his parents as a child, has written that he doesn't "like to be thought of as a 'black writer,' largely because I refuse to accept that my race provides a royal road to understanding the fiction I write." Nevertheless, the unhousing that characterizes the diasporic experience recurs within the collection. In the title story, for instance, the protagonist listens to a fellow guest at a Caribbean Canadian wedding in Ottawa recount his haunting by a *soucouyant*, a blood-sucking ghoul of Caribbean folklore. Like Coleridge's wedding guest in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Alexis's character is transformed by the tale he hears. The *soucouyant* later appears in the young Ottawan's dreams, upending his understanding of community by investing it with new mythologies.

In this story and others, Alexis refutes Earle Birney's claim, in his 1960s poem "Can. Lit.," that our country lacks a sense of historicity: "It's only by our lack of ghosts we're haunted." Alexis's ghosts of memory and reverie reanimate contemporary Canadian experience. Their hauntings invest that experience with tales from distant places and cultures, unsettling it. (The collection's interlocutors include Maupassant, Fuentes, and James, too.) Brainy, horrifying, and internationalist in scope, *The Night Piece* exemplifies the Canadian unhomely in the best of ways. Domesticating the foreign, it renders newly foreign the domestic.

Trash Talk

When I was young and still living at home, I would sometimes walk with my mother around our suburban neighbourhood near Ottawa. During the week, she timed her walks to start after the letter carrier had already made his rounds. As she went, my mother would pick up the dozens of elastic bands that he often casually discarded on the road. When we returned home, she would sit at the kitchen table and cut these thick loops of rubber lengthwise — in order to double their number — and then put them in a kitchen drawer, beside boxes that contained twist-ties, bread clips, pens and pencils, as well as small pieces of paper, saved from used envelopes, that she repurposed for making lists. When I asked her why she did all this, she would reply simply: "Waste not, want not."

This was in the 1980s, a decade of hyperconsumerism, bigger is better, and seemingly limitless supplies of energy. My father made a stable wage, and my mother's behaviour, I am ashamed to say, embarrassed me. Why couldn't she be like other moms, who bought new clothes rather than shopping at Value Village, who drove far more comfortable luxury cars, who filled their kids' lunch boxes with disposable drink containers, ready-made sandwiches, and Del Monte pudding cups that my friends tossed in the garbage? These were women who went to the salon instead of cutting their own hair and who generally lived what appeared to be a carefree, illimitable lifestyle.

My parents were older than my friends' parents and had grown up in Britain during the Second World War. Both came from impoverished families and had experienced relentless and debilitating food insecurity. It wasn't until I was considerably older — and had learned more about the war, the decade of postwar rationing, and the trauma of sustained precarious living — that I began to appreciate my mother's idiosyncrasies as something far more valuable.

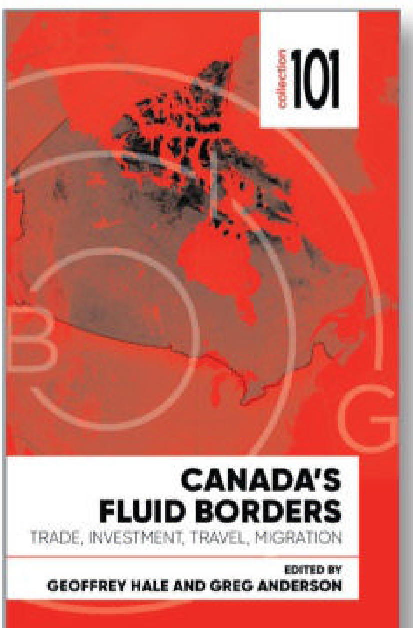
Some forty years later, I see things very differently than I did as a self-centred teen. Whereas my generation once focused our anxieties on holes in the ozone layer, deforestation, and nuclear fallout, we now talk about global warming, biodiversity loss, carbon emissions, oceans filled with more plastics than fish, and the millions who must eke out a living by picking through the colossal garbage dumps of the world's privileged. More and more people are aware of our environmental problems; reusing is not just for eccentric mothers anymore. Most municipalities across Canada have recycling programs, and studies show that about 30 percent of Canadians regularly use the blue bin. Yet our waste problems are only getting worse.

I wanted to write a book that would help lift the veil on Canada's staggering — indeed, world-leading — waste generation, and what we can do about it. Canada produces nearly 1.3 billion tonnes of solid waste annually, which includes everything from mine tailings and livestock manure to 777 kilograms of garbage per person (compared with the OECD average of 610 kilograms). With only 9 percent of our plastics actually being recycled, most of our refuse ends up in domestic landfills or is sent abroad to be openly dumped, landfilled, or incinerated. As I researched and studied the problem — in Alberta and British Columbia, in Ontario, Nova Scotia, and Nunavut — I often thought back to my mother's frugality, her fine-tuned skills of making do with what she had. And I would wish that I had paid more attention back then.

Today, I am trying to catch up with what my mother knew decades ago, to teach my own children how to repair and fix, scrounge and save, and be happy with less. My two teenagers, far more politically and ecologically conscious than I was at their age, wonder how my generation, in particular, allowed the earth to become a dumping ground. My shame and my determination to take responsibility and to leave them with a livable planet press upon me. So, yes, they too know about elastic bands. In our kitchen, we have large balls of them, recovered on walks they take with me after our letter carrier makes her rounds.

Myra J. Hird is the author of Canada's Waste Flows.

Spring Reads



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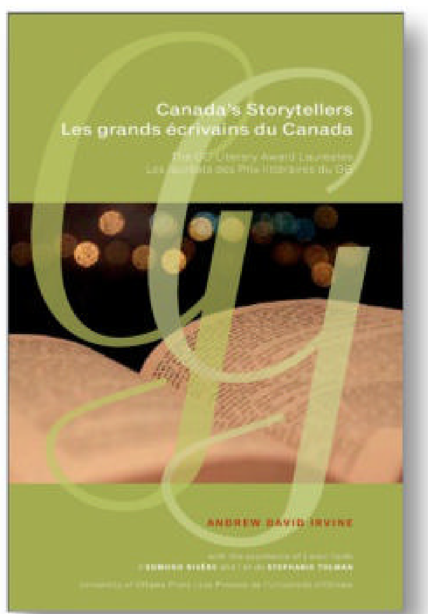

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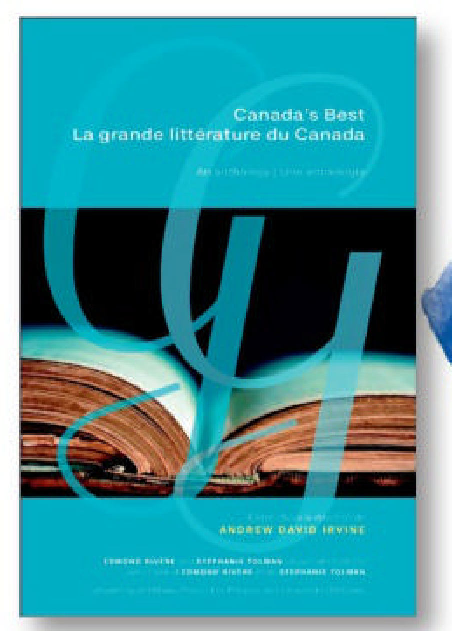

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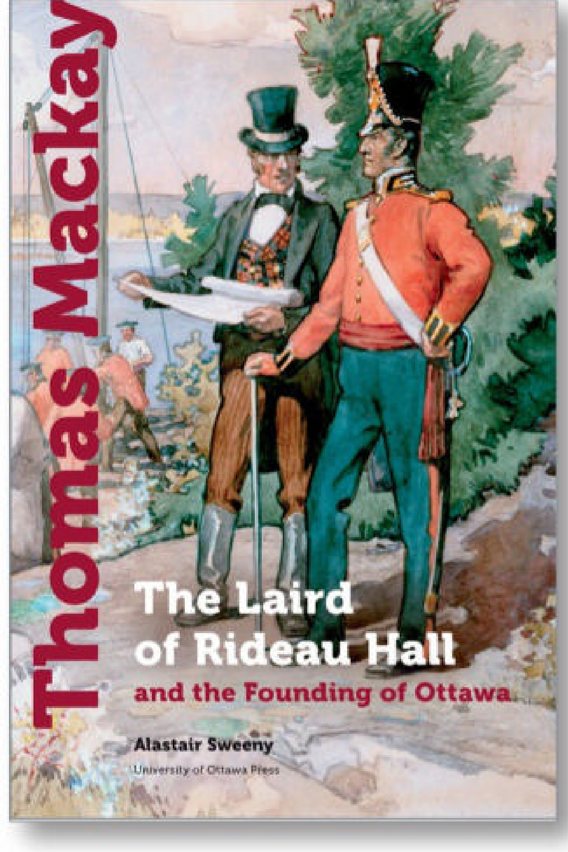

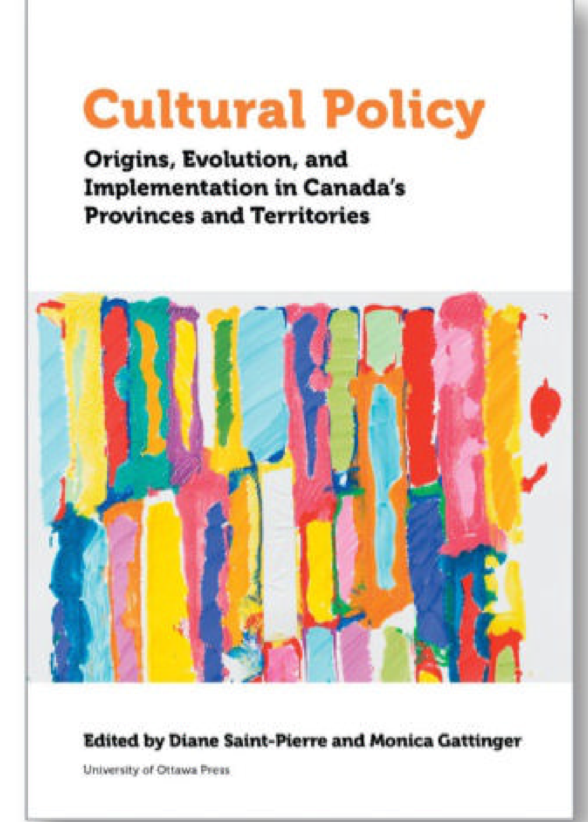

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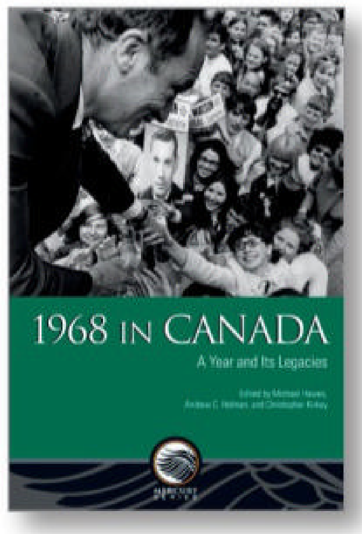

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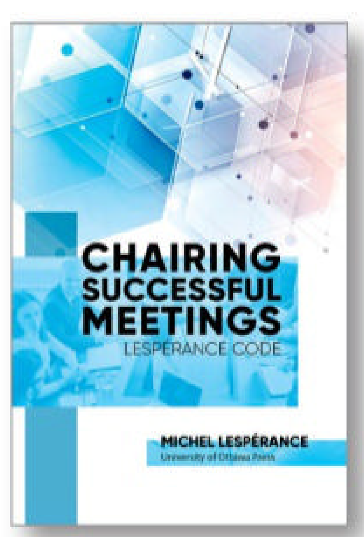

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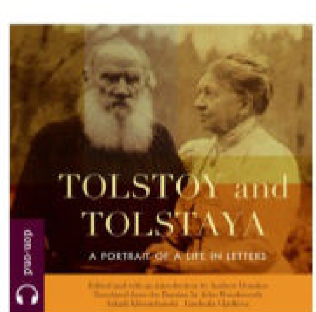

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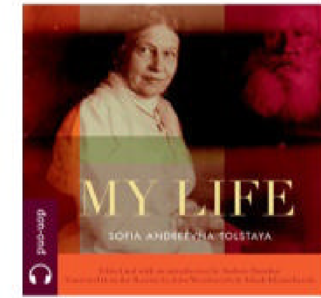

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