

BOOK REVIEWS

From Cohen to Carson: The Poet's Novel in Canada. By Ian Rae. Montreal: McGill-Queen's U Press, 2008. 388 pages.

"A novel is a mirror walking down a road." When a character from *The English Patient* quotes this line from Stendhal's novel, *The Black and the Red*, the reader cannot help but raise an eyebrow, because, for all its wisdom and beauty, Michael Ondaatje's book bears no resemblance to such a mirror. According to Ondaatje, the verisimilitude of a Stendhal novel allows its reader to forget herself and to disappear into the story before her, but Ondaatje's fragmented, imagistic narrative does nothing of the kind. Some have criticized him for this. For example, literary critic Stephen Henighan is scathing in his indictment of Ondaatje's "metaphor-saturated" aesthetic, which, he argues, "closes off meaningful comprehension of the past" (138, 140). And yet, Ondaatje's lyrical and radically discontinuous style has been so influential in Canada, that there now is, as George Bowering says, "a genre called the Ondaatje" (Rae, 5).

Before Ondaatje made genre-blending so popular, numerous other Canadian writers—including George Bowering, Elizabeth Smart, Roy Kiyooka and Leonard Cohen—were experimenting with the limits of the lyric, the long poem and the novel to create a narrative mode distinct from the plot-driven and largely linear realist novel. In an attempt to understand the popularity and the promise of such writing, Ian Rae has written a very fine book: *From Cohen to Carson: The Poet's Novel in Canada*. As his title suggests, Rae explores the recent history of one of Canada's most distinctive literary genres—the poet's novel—and demonstrates how its practitioners have transformed the idea of narrative coherence by adapting the devices of contemporary poetry for prose fiction.

Although he nods to Elizabeth Smart, A.M. Klein and Roy Kiyooka, Rae really begins with Leonard Cohen. The exuberance and apparent chaos of Cohen's novels is such that they are notoriously resistant to criticism, but Rae's consideration of the ways that Cohen uses recurring visual motifs to create narrative continuity in *The Favourite Game* is lucid and compelling.

"Narrative continuity" is the title of one of the poems in Daphne Marlatt's prose poem cycle, *How Hug a Stone*, and it is not surprising that Rae devotes a chapter to Marlatt, whose stylistic experimentation he understands as a response to "a largely male-mentored postmodernist poetic" and a rejection of the heterosexism of the traditional quest narrative, a genre that interested Marlatt throughout her career. The chapter on George Bowering's *Autobiology* contains an engaging discussion of the ways in which editorial pressures entrench genre boundaries, and rightly emphasizes how studies of anti/confessional practices in Canadian literature have underestimated the debt that writers like Marlatt, Ondaatje and Fred Wah owe to Bowering.

The chapter on Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* is just that—a reading of the text. It is thorough, but weighed down by endnotes—248 of them. Although Rae writes consistently clear and engaging prose, his citational fervour is distracting and sometimes tedious. On the other hand, he includes some great quotes, such as Phyllis Webb's comparison of narrative form to a necklace in which each linked "bead-poem" is "self-sufficient, independent, lyrical" (37).

The first of the two remaining chapters reads *Autobiography of Red*, Anne Carson's novel in verse, as a "novel inverse," an "overturning of expectations in both form and content" (224). Here Rae, who is also the author of two outstanding essays on Carson's poetry and prose, excels. His analysis of the terse, syncopated and complex apparatus that surrounds the love story at the heart of Carson's *Autobiography of Red* is fresh and self-assured. He also does an outstanding job of showing how Carson (following Gertrude Stein) reconceptualises autobiography—as though written by someone else—so as to explore the pleasures and difficulties of multiplicitious identity.

Rae's final chapter examines Ondaatje's *The English Patient* alongside Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*. For the most part it is a response to Stephen Henighan, whose book, *When Words Deny the World: The Reshaping of Canadian Writing* (2002), contains a long attack on both novels, which he understands as representative of a regrettable fashion for books that are "self-consciously 'artistic' without posing the challenges of authentic art" (quoted by Rae, 262). The decision to foreground Henighan is regrettable, because Henighan's argument, unlike Rae's, is polemical and unnuanced. That said, Rae certainly succeeds in his attempt to offer "a framework against which one can judge the differences among poet-novelists" (8). With all his citations, he also gives us a framework against which to judge the differences among Can. Lit. scholars. And Ian Rae comes out near the front of the pack. His book *From Cohen to Carson* makes a very important contribution to Canadian literary criticism. It will become required reading for scholars of contemporary Canadian literature.

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Canadian Content: Culture and the Quest for Nationhood. By Ryan Edwardson. Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 2008. 360 pages. \$27.95 paper.

Ryan Edwardson's book offers an examination of the political, economic, and socio-cultural underpinnings of Canadian cultural nationalism. Taking a broad-swatch approach, this ambitious project follows the historical development of nationalistic discourses through which arts cultures—including television, publishing, film, higher education, theatre, and the fine arts—have been constituted in this country since the 1940s.

What Edwardson does here is identify three primary phases of nationalist-cultural discourse of "Canadianization," through which "nation-builders tried to

imprint a sense of nationhood” on the imagined community called “Canada” with varying degrees of success (5). The author identifies these as pre-1950s “Masseyism,” “the ‘new nationalism’” of the 1960–70s, and Trudeau’s “cultural industrialism” that continues into the contemporary period.

Perhaps the strongest analytic component of this text comes right at the beginning. Edwardson lays out some important arguments in support of his tripartite vision of Canadian cultural history in the introduction. He argues that “[S]een together, [these periods] expose changing conceptions of nation, culture, state involvement, and an ongoing post-colonial process of not one but a series of radically different nationhoods” (6). The main through line here is the way arts and culture have been used as nation-building projects in Canada. Edwardson provides some very interesting discussions about the privileging of Euro-British conceptions of artistry and merit in this country. This has included the positioning of British nationals in key positions in Canadian arts and culture institutions. It has also included a strategic Angophilic aligning of Canadian national identity in the arts and culture realm as a tool to ward off American cultural imperialism.

Class and, to some extent, Imperial interests have largely underpinned the social movements Edwardson describes. As Edwardson rightly points out, it is often the case that “‘National good’ is equated with the ‘public good’ when in fact it often entrenches class and economic interests benefiting a minority” (24). This type of analysis is carried through in the book, and examinations of particular forms of class privilege are highlighted. To some extent, the author also takes up how this privilege is tied in to notions about the value of Anglo culture, but these issues are rarely complicated in order to really highlight interconnections between class and various other sites of privilege and oppression. That is, there is little discussion of the way class interests are embedded in colonial histories girded by particular understandings of linguistic, regionalized, racialized, gendered, and sexually oriented identities in Canada.

Having said that, I don’t think Edwardson could have tackled these complexities in this book; certainly not as it stands here. Already, my primary critique of the book is that it does far too much for one volume of under 400 pages. This is not to say that what is included in this book isn’t done well. It is. *Canadian Content* is overflowing with interesting bits of information that will be extremely useful to scholars and students in a variety of areas. But there’s too much included here and at times the book ends up feeling messy and a bit overwhelming, particularly the way the chapters jump around from one area of arts culture to another. But maybe that’s because I read the book straight through, like a traditional, linear narrative—like a good student who feels that she MUST read every page. I suggest that some readers would get more out of this book if they skipped around in it, reading it with a focus on the particular historical narratives that most interest them. For example, my primary interest is television. If I read just the parts of the book that focus on the history of Canadian TV, I get a much tighter, more focused and compelling story than I did when I read the book through from start to finish.

I think that approaching the book this way will make it more useful and enjoyable to a broader number of readers. It will expose some of the lack of depth in the analysis provided outside of the introduction, as well as the relative glossing of the most recent period of cultural production, at least compared to the more rigorous documentation of the earlier periods. However, I think that these are less things that the book is “lacking” than inevitable gaps—gaps waiting to be filled by others—created in the amassing of such an amazing amount of material as has been assembled here. In a way, this book is like five or six books in one. Each subject area could be taken on its own and expanded to provide a deeper and more critical examination of texts and players. And hopefully that’s how other scholars will use this book.

It’s a good time for this book to be coming out. *Canadian Content* is a much-appreciated addition to the study of Canadian arts and media cultures, which is experiencing a lot of growth at the moment. It is especially useful as a companion to books—such as Mary Jane Miller’s *Outside Looking In: Viewing First Nations Peoples in Canadian Dramatic Television Series* (2008), Zoe Druick and Aspa Kotsopoulos’s *Programming Reality: Perspectives on English-Canadian Television* (2008), or Serra Tinic’s *On Location: Canada’s Television Industry in a Global Market* (2005)—that tackle more specific aspects of cultural production and policy in Canada. Edwardson provides a systematic and very well researched history of the debates and events that have shaped arts and culture policy for close to a hundred years.

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The Canadian Short Story: Interpretations. Edited by Reingard M. Nischik. Camden House, 2007. X, 424 pages. \$75.00.

With this thoughtfully designed and researched collection, Reingard M. Nischik and her CanLit team from the European German-speaking countries make a major contribution to the undeservedly small canon of literary criticism on Canadian short fiction. At the outset, however, one must acknowledge what the editor does not: that the focus is exclusively on English-Canadian writing. Unfortunately, then, a vigorous and experimental strain of Canadian short fiction is omitted. Nischik’s summary of previous work in the field describes an overabundance of historical approaches that this collection tries to counter-balance; claiming that it is the first overview by way of assembled interpretations of major Canadian short stories, the book attempts and largely succeeds in filling an almost unfathomable hole in the cultural geography of the country.

By depicting the major turning points in the evolution of the Canadian short story, Nischik offers a contextualized historical survey. In a sometimes eccentric selection of predominantly short fiction writers (the exclusion of Alistair MacLeod and Barbara Gowdy is, at best, eccentric), each chapter pivoting on a close reading of one story, the collection describes the important themes and characteristics of the

genre. It gives an instructive and engaging historical outline that finds some of its intelligibility in a comparative account of the development of the American short story. One wonders whether comparisons with other English-speaking countries would have been instructive: Ireland's contribution to the genre is the most striking example. Nevertheless, the introduction manages to hold together a vast mapping of a creative landscape while describing an unfolding literary drama.

The following chapters are devoted to important writers, providing brief accounts of their personal and professional lives and summaries of their writing achievements. The selection of writers and stories was based on a survey of ninety-two Canadian short story anthologies. That frequency of publication was the sole determinant for inclusion is problematic, even though Nischik argues that the method is appropriate "given the current state of scholarship in the area" (2-3). That so fluid and nuanced a form as the short story should prompt such a mechanical and trepidatious approach is also problematic, particularly given the scholarly resources of critics who work largely outside anthology-making. Moreover, although Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant, and Margaret Atwood are designated the "leading" short story writers, none of them receives discussion worthy of their contributions to the genre.

This is especially true in the editor's own chapter on Munro. Nischik's apparently schematic choice and gender reading of the much-anthologized "Boys and Girls" does not illustrate her accurate description of Munro as a writer of great complexity and variety. Her obvious and all-too-commonsensual reading of the story stands in the way of deeper understanding. The many exciting aspects of Munro's aesthetic techniques and thematic dimensions that Nischik touches upon never find root in her analysis. A more explorative and malleable approach (and the selection of a story less explicitly adaptable to a predictable interpretation) might have brought such an important chapter closer to what is revolutionary within this preeminent writer's rich production.

Nischik is more attentive to Margaret Atwood's prolific genre crossovers. Facts and biographical details are interwoven with perspectives on Atwood's literary development, painting a dynamic portrait of an artist who moves across vast intellectual areas. The autobiographical reading of Atwood's "Significant Moments in the Life of my Mother" is admirable; even if there is a lack of explicit commentary about the implications of an autobiographical perspective on a story about a female narrative tradition, Nischik points to the potential of such an exploration.

Gallant, the third of the short story triumvirate, also receives uneven attention from Silvia Mergenthal. The enumeration of facts as an introduction to the writer has an uncertain direction, and quotations are sometimes left to speak for themselves. On the other hand, Mergenthal's highly original approach to the contextualization of the story, by expanding the discussion to include the three different collections in which it has been published, creates a rich mapping of Gallant's themes and techniques.

Another paradox in this book is that the two most accomplished discussions are about male writers, Clark Blaise and Leon Rooke, both of them with American

geographical roots, both with a powerful sense of formal experimentation. In the excellent chapter on Blaise, a variety of resources—the writer’s comments, accounts of his literary context, and deftly employed critical terminology—work in a well-balanced interpretative elucidation of both story and style. The chapter also includes an illuminating passage on possible influences and mentors: the account of the influential Montreal Story Tellers, aligned with the voice of the critic, manages to evoke the aura and character of the writer himself in his concern with the multiplicity of borders. Wolfgang Klooß moves gracefully between genre definitions, comparisons and similarities with other writers, biographical facts, thematic occupations, writing techniques, aesthetic ideals and criticism. The result of this critical depth is a rich understanding of both the author and his artistic environment. Leon Rooke elicits an equally dense, knowledgeable, and forceful response from Nadja Gernalzick, who also highlights the importance of place and its relation to the intricacies of narration. She astutely points to Rooke’s Gothic elements and to the impress of magic realism on his fiction, while at the same time recognizing its persistent moral reserves and purposes.

While rarely at its best in exploring the actual prose, this collection is highly valuable in directing the reader of English-Canadian short fiction toward the central and sometimes the covert issues embedded in this extraordinary body of imaginative work: Sheila Watson’s ties with postmodern attitudes to myth; Carol Shields’s interlacing of the public and the personal; Mordecai Richler and the recently evolved “urban tradition” set in motion by Morley Callaghan and Hugh Garner; the continuity between Margaret Laurence’s African and Manawaka stories and the importance for her of continuity itself; Janice Kulyk Keefer’s gravitation to states of otherness, division, and displacement, and her ability, as Georgiana Banita eloquently conceives it, to “straddle the line between poetry and prose with ... wayward elegance.” Along with these achievements, the collection succeeds in expanding the canon itself, through reclaiming and returning to critical attention the indispensable work of Raymond Knister and, even more so, that of the highly enigmatic Norman Levine.

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Watermelon Syrup. By Annie Jacobsen with Jane Finlay-Young and Di Brandt. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier U Press, 2007. ix, 265 pages. \$24.95 paper.

Hard Passage: A Mennonite Family’s Long Journey from Russia to Canada. By Arthur Kroeger. Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 2007. xii, 269 pages. \$34.95 paper.

Watermelon Syrup is a recent volume in the Wilfrid Laurier University Life Writing series. One of Canada's leading scholars of life writing, Helen Buss, has equated life writing or autobiography with therapy, for both writer and reader. That characterization seems apt for this novel, described in Jane Finley-Young's foreword as arising from vignettes of family history that Annie shared with her mother when they were also sharing a struggle with cancer.

Perhaps a similar therapeutic impetus could be ascribed to Arthur Kroeger in the writing of *Hard Passage*. A Rhodes Scholar, federal deputy minister and Carleton University Chancellor, at the end of his distinguished public career Kroeger took on the task of chronicling the history of his family and the wave of Mennonite immigration of which they were a part. As Charlotte Gray comments on the back cover, this is "a history to which he had hitherto paid little attention."

These books are alike in their discovery of histories to which little attention had been paid, and each discovery occurs through the familiar literary device of a notebook exposing the narrator or protagonist to a story that demands telling. Kroeger's parents never spoke much of their past, but he discovered after his father's death the notebooks that recorded Heinrich and Helena Kroeger's experiences, the idyllic "golden years" in Ukraine, the arduous journey to Canada, and the unending struggle to make a new life in Alberta, where Arthur and more siblings were added to the family. In *Watermelon Syrup*, Aleksandra, or Lexi, discovers the notebook in which her brother began furiously recording his thoughts after witnessing a horrible act during the tumultuous years after the Russian Revolution. Lexi was hiding when the terrible event occurred and saw only the aftermath, the meaning of which was lost on her as a very small girl. Her family certainly never spoke of this secret, and that unspoken trauma paralyzed them.

In the prologue to *Watermelon Syrup* we meet the elderly Aleksandra in the mid 1990s, at the hospital for her cancer treatment. The titular confection conjures up for her memories of Oma's garden and house, and the good life that the family enjoyed before the 1920s. The main body of the novel transports us to 1933, when 17-year-old Lexi travels from the family home in Saskatchewan to Waterloo, Ontario, to serve as a maid for a non-Mennonite family. In her afterword, Di Brandt comments on the sociological strangeness of this reality—a non-conformist, communalist society sending its daughters out to work as domestic servants in the wider world. It was, in fact, quite common. The danger of this venture for the insular community is realized when the influence of the urban, secular Oliver family and her new girlfriend Georgie leads Lexi to modernize her dress and her hair, to drive the car, to try smoking and drinking, and to flirt with the pudgy but sensual Dr. Oliver. The characters of the morality play are somewhat stereotypical, but also nuanced. Dr. Oliver is genuinely kind to Lexi, yet in the end coldly exploits her. His wife Cammy seems insane and inept, yet she has a hard-earned knowledge of the world that could help rescue Lexi from her naïveté. Mama's inability to show love toward her children is redeemed in her last days, sharing the secret of the notebook, its pain and the possibility for redemption for Lexi, the chance to "erase bitterness." Papa, the obstinate tyrant, is a flat character, but it's a true portrait; there really seems to be nothing to him beyond the will to dominate

and the failure to communicate with any words other than biblical quotations. The oppressive nature of life with Papa in that household is one of the most striking features of this book.

In a 1987 interview with Hildi Froese Tiessen, Manitoba Mennonite writer Patrick Friesen spoke of his colleague Di Brandt's struggles with publishing: "With her, it was simply being a woman having been brought up to 'Quiet! Quiet!' and not saying anything, so therefore: write" (*Prairie Fire* 11.2 [1990]: 155). Mennonite communities have always espoused pacifism and nonresistance towards outsiders, but also rigid conformity within the circle. Those who write, or speak, or read against community mores risk being cast out or "shunned." Both Brandt and Friesen have experienced a negative backlash from their communities for writing "what ought not to be written." In *Watermelon Syrup*, Lexi is shunned by her father and sent back to Waterloo for reading "what ought not to have been written," for daring to have her own aspirations, and for refusing to be quiet.

Hard Passage doesn't risk shunning since it does not share this critical perspective on Mennonite ways. Kroeger gives us a fascinating, moving and articulate account of both his family's experience and the history of the Mennonite exodus from Russia to Canada, but the book sits uneasily between memoir and history. His observation, for instance, that his non-Mennonite but Eastern European schoolmates in rural Alberta came to school with "garlic on their breath" is a colourful if generalizing personal reminiscence, but it doesn't sit well beside the rigorously researched historical accounts of the support for Mennonite immigration from David Toews and the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, or Colonel John Dennis and the Colonization Branch of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

Both of these books capture the remarkable experience of a significant immigrant population to Canada and the inter-generational struggle between preserving a culture and religion and adapting to new circumstances. Each is infused with both biblical quotations and *Plautdietsch*, the Low German language of the traditional Mennonite home, evoking the maintenance of a community across several diasporic centuries. Each takes us along on a hard passage from paradise through hell to the immigrant vision of a new life in a new world, in which one hopes to see one's children achieve success, and in which the bitterness of the past can be erased. And through these apparently therapeutic efforts, Kroeger and Jacobsen have perhaps each, for themselves, their families, their communities, created a life in writing.

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