

# BOOK REVIEWS

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*We Are What We Mourn: The Contemporary English-Canadian Elegy.* By Priscila Uppal. Montreal: McGill-Queen's U Press, 2008. 318 pp. \$80.00.

In her latest book, *We Are What We Mourn: The Contemporary English-Canadian Elegy*, Priscila Uppal exchanges epigraphs for epitaphs, reanimating the elegy—a genre that has never died, but has never really lived in Canada. Uppal's book represents a bold and much-needed first step towards enlivening this lamentably neglected tradition.

While death requires the physical dislocation of the dead from the living, Uppal argues that contemporary Canadian elegists attempt to create spaces for sustained communication between the two states of being, thus allowing for a polyphony of voices where traditionally only the mourner's voice is audible. Uppal draws on "more than a thousand elegies, and hundreds of poetry collections by twentieth-century English-Canadian writers" (23), in order to consider the development of a distinctly Canadian elegiac tradition beginning in the late 1960s.

The first chapter focuses upon the parental elegy, which foregrounds elegists' reconstructions of family after death. Turning first to Margaret Atwood's *Morning in the Burned House*, Uppal argues that it works both within and against the traditional English elegy because "Atwood simultaneously claims the canonical male tradition of the elegy for herself, and reveals the shortcomings in its articulation of grief and its construction of consolation" (46). Uppal suggests that something similar happens in Daphne Marlatt's "How Hug a Stone." Through this text Marlatt takes up (and challenges) the identifiably English tradition of the pastoral elegy. Though the family dynamics elaborated through these versions of the elegy are complex—and at times tenuous—they are necessary, for, as Uppal emphasizes, to discover ourselves we must recover our parents/parentage. The complexity at the heart of this project of recovery is particularly poignant in her evocative and nuanced (though short) reading of Anne Carson's "Appendix to Ordinary Time," a poem that embodies a resounding series of elegiac echoes: the classical and the contemporary; the living and the dead; the male and the female; the English and the Canadian.

Chapter two is heavy on theory, though Uppal does a commendable job of fleshing out competing discourses (namely localism, regionalism, and nationalism) before perusing elegists' "Method[s] for Calling Up Ghosts." Here, she discusses identity formation in terms of its relationship to place. Examining *Isolating Civil Elegies*, Dennis Lee's meditation on the Canadian literary and cultural struggle against British and American forces, Uppal offers a reading of Lee's interest in the absence of communal ties at both the local and national levels. Lee's elegies provide a methodology through which to reconfigure the relationships between Canadians at all levels; in effect, works of mourning produce communal ties through a collec-

tive grief that transcends social, cultural, or political difference. Similarly, Uppal considers the role of archeology in Robert Kroetsch's long poem elegies, paying particular attention to the ways in which he is able to connect temporally and geographically disparate communities. The aporia articulated by Lee and Kroetsch is then explored in her readings of the elegiac work of Milton Acorn, Aritha van Herk, George Bowering, and Al Purdy.

In her third and most evocative chapter, "What We Save Saves Us: Elegies for Cultural Losses and Displacements," Uppal evaluates the ways in which a number of Canada's postcolonial poets deal with social trauma, from the black diaspora to the Holocaust. For example, she considers how Anne Michaels' long poem "What The Light Teaches" reflects upon and works through a collective cultural memory lacerated by the Holocaust. While Michaels' poetry provides a means of addressing the past through the elegy, it also reveals the limitations of the genre in its abilities to heal a collective past so deeply injured. Still, while the elegy opens old wounds, it can help the injured read the scars. Uppal argues that the production "of a witness role for a community is the most crucial work of mourning Michaels performs in her elegy." She follows this observation with an idea that seems to guide the project as a whole: "[m]emory, unlike history, can be witnessed by future communities" (202). Elsewhere in this chapter Uppal considers the musicality of Dionne Brand's poem sequence "No Language Is Neutral." Entranced by one of Brand's spellbinding song sequences, whose elegiac tone Uppal reads as a "séance" (231), the poet in Uppal momentarily appears, singing "the narrator's prose poem circles the absence with lush language like large nets trying to drag the story back to shore" (233).

*We Are What We Mourn* represents the first book-length study of the English-Canadian elegy, offering readers a compelling survey of selected poets' elegiac works since 1967. In her coda, Uppal suggests that the post-9/11 world supplies myriad opportunities for the elegy and its study. I agree, but it feels more urgent to dig deeper into our distant collective (and not so collective) past by listening to those poets—possibly now ghosts themselves—who participated within the tradition in its pre-centennial Canadian incarnations. Though the book fills a lacuna in Canadian literary criticism, it reveals another, and I hope Uppal's groundwork will inspire new interest in the Canadian elegy—a body of literature in need of further exhumation.

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*Translating Pain: Immigrant Suffering in Literature and Culture.* By Madelaine Hron. Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 2009. xix, 300 pages. \$60.00.

In this study of global immigrant writing, Madelaine Hron demonstrates remarkable critical and theoretical dexterity. Most earlier work on immigrant literature has been nationally focused; *Translating Pain* is a transnational and interdisciplinary study. In her Introduction, Hron insists on the importance of an interdisciplinary approach

to the study of immigrant narratives; she deftly formulates a theoretical apparatus through which she studies texts by Maghrebi, Haitian and Czech writers, drawing on such varied fields as trauma studies, psychology and medicine, cultural studies, as well as literary theory. Each chapter draws on an astonishing array of political, anthropological, medical, and psychological materials in its analysis of immigrant literature. More importantly, Hron exploits the lacunae within many theoretical approaches to trauma and immigration, formulating a theory of immigrant suffering that takes into account both the literary performances as well as the lived experiences of immigrant writers. Hron examines a tendency among immigrants to “play down their suffering of immigration ... so as to measure up to the stereotypical fiction of success” (xix). She argues that the familiar formulation of the immigrant narrative elides the pain and suffering that the immigrant experiences in his/her new country. In her study of immigrant narratives, Hron explores the various aims and representational possibilities in depicting the suffering of immigrants.

She begins by challenging the prevalent trends in trauma theory, represented by Virginia Woolf, Elaine Scarry, Cathy Caruth and others. While these critics have tended to assert that suffering is unrepresentable, Hron draws on translation theory (most notably, in the writings of Roman Jakobson) to demonstrate that pain is not necessarily “untranslatable’ in fiction or cultural production” (xvi). She identifies the deconstructionist tendency in trauma studies to represent pain as something unrepresentable, and drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s linguistic theory and Jakobson’s theories of translation, posits that suffering can, in fact, be communicated through language. While Hron’s manipulation of often disparate schools of scholarship is impressive, portions of Part I, in which she lays the theoretical groundwork for her later examination of literary texts, would benefit from a more explicit connection to the immigrant narratives she studies.

In Part II, Hron examines the depictions of bodily suffering by Maghrebi writers. Her discussion focuses primarily on seldom-read and difficult-to-obtain texts, which is surprising—and often frustrating—as it renders her attempts to assert a widely applicable theory of immigrant suffering problematic. Although Hron acknowledges that other (and perhaps more widely read) texts often depict the suffering of Maghrebi immigrants differently, she unfortunately does not include these texts in her discussion. Her study explores the potential of representations of pain and dismemberment to force a recognition of Maghrebi writers’ “personhood, and even, perhaps, their social suffering” (67). She argues that these often graphic representations of physical suffering strip the body of cultural signifiers, adding that Maghrebi narratives of immigration and suffering frequently duplicate, rather than resist, the stereotypical representations of Muslim or Arab characters, and that the protagonists of Maghrebi immigrant narratives can only derive power and authority by representing themselves as victimized. Her arguments are persuasive, though perhaps not widely applicable, as the reader must consider the relative obscurity of the texts in question. Nonetheless, this discussion allows Hron to problematize “zeroism” (116), or the tendency to celebrate pathological victimhood.

Part III examines the Haitian practice of vodou, separating it from sensationalized popular representations of voodoo. Hron argues that, unlike Maghrebi immigrant narratives, which depict a culturally undifferentiated body, Haitian immigrant writers use depictions of vodou to situate “migrant bodies in pain” (136) as culturally and ethnically particular. Hron’s discussion of Edwidge Danticat’s fiction is particularly interesting; Hron contends that Danticat’s fiction exposes the complexities of translating Haitian culture into a North American environment. Her examination of texts by Danticat and other Haitian-born writers leads her to conclude that literary representations of vodou signal “difference and loss” (182), thereby conveying the pain of the immigrant experience.

In Part IV, Hron shifts her emphasis from immigration to emigration, examining Czech emigrés’ relationship to their home country. Hron charts Czech emigration in the twentieth century, arguing that Czech writers’ flight from totalitarianism necessitated an elision of the painful experiences of exile and emigration. She discusses the perceived moral value of suffering—either the suffering of the exile, or the suffering of the Czech who remains in the homeland under a totalitarian regime—and the difficult process of returning home. Czech emigrant writing requires the reader to recognize “more indirect rhetorics of pain” and “more latent forms of suffering” (226) than those that manifest themselves in other immigrant narratives.

My only serious misgiving with this excellent study of immigrant literature is that it is not broader in its scope. Despite Hron’s assertion that she has “often lamented academic departmentalization” and that her book “seeks to cross the boundaries of national literatures” (xv), her compartmentalized approach, in which she theorizes pain and translation in relative isolation from her subsequent discussions of Maghrebi, Haitian and Czech literatures, represents in itself a departmentalizing tendency. Given Hron’s ability to forge dialogues between often disparate critical and theoretical schools, I had hoped for an approach to the literatures that sees immigrant literatures in conversation, rather than in isolation. However, by identifying the gaps in literary criticism on immigrant writing, and by critically querying the prevalent elision of immigrant suffering in both studies of immigrant literatures and of the immigrant experience itself, Hron has made an important entry into the fields of national and transnational literatures.

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*Word Burials*. By J.J. Steinfeld. London, ON: Crossing Chaos Enigmatic Ink, 2009. viii. 250 pages. \$15.50.

J.J. Steinfeld’s *Word Burials* includes an ambitious, finely honed novel by the same name along with five short stories. This is Steinfeld’s second novel, his first being *Our Hero in the Cradle of Confederation* (1987). He has also published nine volumes of short stories as well as plays, a poetry collection, and chapbooks. Themes and

narrative strategies from the five stories reverberate throughout the novel. This latest book shows Steinfeld finding a new balance between grasping history through events and cultural accounts, while searching out a future through fantasy, imagination, and reflective thought.

Starting with a photograph of Samuel Beckett in the cover design; considering the dedication to a fictional presence, “For Godot”; and fathoming the appearance of Beckett as a character interpreting the protagonist, himself a Beckett scholar, one would not be over-reading to say the novel is indebted to Beckett’s plays. Beckett’s protagonist Winnie (*Happy Days*) is rewritten in *Word Burials* as Thad Johnstone (one of whose other names is Yehuda Isaacovicz, which conveys his Jewish roots, mined for use against him by his oppressor, Lurvarum). Professor Thad Johnstone was captured by Caleb Lurvarum, husband of the duplicitous Dorothy with whom Johnstone had an affair, and buried up to his neck in sand. Sand is a metaphor for Johnstone’s entrapment in a “Jewish ghetto”: entrapment in a personal Jewish past of “Hebrew School,” “the blue tattoos,” and the expectations of his mother and maternal grandparents, who were concentration camp survivors (69). The cast is rounded out by Lurvarum’s mistress Lydia, who happily joins the married couple in absurd sadistic rituals played upon Johnstone and a “deaf-mute servant” named Mule (10). In this psychosexual drama, madcap events happen to Johnstone when he is buried to his neck in sand on a beach, or encased in a concrete shed.

His “freest act” (73) is writing a novel on demand for Lurvarum. Johnstone dictates the work into a tape player, as does Beckett’s Krapp (*Krapp’s Last Tape*), who similarly records his perceptions on soured love relationships and existence. In the Beckett play, Krapp presides over his study. Steinfeld’s vivid, colourful characters are also set in one place (the beach) with Lurvarum and Dorothy’s house created mostly offstage. Even though the protagonist is entombed in the sand, there is a surprising amount of action in Steinfeld’s narrative, which is broken into 46 transcribed tapes. The crime-movie resolution leads toward justice in the ending, which takes place in Lurvarum’s palatial guest bathroom.

The five stories that follow the novel are classic Steinfeld pieces, conveying familiar themes in original ways. First, in “An Appearance of a Lifetime,” a recognisable bar setting of twisted desire amidst captivity, occurs in the “strangely popular windowless concrete block of a pub ... on the way to nowhere memorable” (181). The concrete bar enclosure highlights by comparison different forms of captivity such as occur in the novel (for example, the concrete shed), and are signalled by the title of Steinfeld’s early short story collection—*Forms of Captivity and Escape* (1988). Interrogation for past crime in the second story, “Film Studies,” is reminiscent of Steinfeld’s masterful “Executions and the Memory of Executions” (*Anton Chekhov Was Never in Charlottetown*, 2000). *Word Burials* also showcases Steinfeld’s narrative capacity for precisely placing events by referencing both historical and cultural accounts. For instance, a film prison situates the story’s events and characters. The narrator mentions Wallace Beery in *The Big House*, where the protagonist of “Film Studies” could be headed: “Wallace Beery, 1930 ... one policeman says he was

in short pants when that movie came out” (198). The third story, “Gregor Samsa Was Never in the Beatles,” reveals *The Metamorphosis* and Kafka’s importance to Steinfeld’s repertoire of effects.

Two final stories direct the book’s concerns toward the future. “The Man Who Was Only History” involves the last Jewish survivor of Auschwitz. In 2047, a journalist travels to get the 120-year-old survivor’s “story,” one his editor says isn’t “a story anymore” (215): “the young journalist ... [was] attracted by something he did not comprehend, but would try to, if it took the rest of his life” (232). The final story, “Streets Are Not Always for Walking,” moves further away from recognisable history toward the outcome of an unidentified war, long after one that is represented to the protagonist in a photograph of his great-grandfather in military uniform. The narrator—“the only one here to survive” (250)—construes his significance in respect of the past: “If I could remember my great-grandfather’s war, perhaps then I would know who I was and what had happened to everything around me” (250).

Steinfeld’s last three story collections (Gaspereau Press, 1999; 2000; 2003) include stories about the effects of war, specifically the Jewish Holocaust, on survivors and subsequent generations—set alongside others on wide-ranging topics from love, childhood, youth and family, to betrayal. *Word Burials* goes further than previous collections by offering a view of existence shaped by the past but also contoured for navigating an uncertain future. In “Streets Are Not Always for Walking,” the injured soldier grapples with his circumstances within a series of war events by creatively using language: “I told myself that I was alive, existing, by the very fact that I was thinking of such words as alive and existing... What words could I give to my situation, to my existence?” (246). The condition of “living incarceration” (243) is represented in many forms, from concrete buildings such as the shed in *Word Burials* and the bar in “An Appearance of a Lifetime,” to concrete roads that the soldier navigates in his delirium within “Streets Are Not Always for Walking,” to sand itself—a component of concrete. Through fiction, Steinfeld seeks to “[t]ell [the Holocaust survivor’s] story truthfully ... His being and history protect” us (231). Words, which may contribute to captivity, also potentially facilitate escape.

Sandra Singer

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*Shakespeare as Children’s Literature: Edwardian Retellings in Words and Pictures.* By Velma Bourgeois Richmond. London: McFarland & Company, 2008. viii, 363 pages. \$35.00.

Velma Richmond’s *Shakespeare as Children’s Literature: Edwardian Retellings in Words and Pictures* follows her 2004 *Chaucer as Children’s Literature: Retellings from the Victorian and Edwardian Eras*. Its particular value arises from its central focus upon retellings of Shakespeare in children’s literature in the Edwardian era. This period was, Richmond claims, a kind of Golden Age in children’s literature that coincided

with a Golden Age in children's book illustration. Central to Richmond's account, and occupying her attention during the first three chapters of her book, is Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*. First published in 1807, *Tales from Shakespeare* was a pioneering experiment in adapting Shakespeare's dramas into prose stories suitable for children and young women. To achieve their goal, the brother and sister duo deftly avoided or re-worked the complexities of Shakespeare's language and the "adult content" of many of his plot situations. In their place, retellings of twenty selected plays were crafted into moral tales suited to the mores of the time that pertained to young readers and the sensibilities of young females.

Richmond's first chapter discusses the literary and cultural context from which *Tales from Shakespeare* emerged, together with the developing context regarding literature for children in the century following its publication. Accordingly, she touches on such precursors as eighteenth-century chapbooks (7–9), relevant nineteenth-century phenomena such as the introduction of English literature (including the reading of passages from Shakespeare) into the school curriculum (19–20), and, leaping past the Edwardian era, the 1921 *Newbolt Report on The Teaching of English in England* (20–24). This same somewhat catchall of a chapter also includes a section on "Illustrations." These were an important feature of the first edition of *Tales from Shakespeare*, although Charles Lamb was not pleased with how they turned out, and they remained a prominent attraction in many subsequent editions. Indeed, during the Victorian period generally, illustrations became increasingly prominent in publications for children, and illustrators were typically paid as much as writers (18).

In Chapter Two, Richmond begins her detailed discussion of *Tales from Shakespeare*, "the first book published specifically as 'easy reading for very young children'" (25). In a page and a half, she notes the respective contributions of Charles and Mary Lamb. This latter wrote all but the final paragraph of the Preface, and fourteen tales to her brother's six. She notes the bias towards retellings of the comedies, of which all but two are included, whereas only six tragedies are represented, and all the Histories are omitted, together with four Roman plays. She also notes the bias towards fairies, claiming that it matched a contemporary trend towards appropriating fairy tales for the use of children, though she offers no specific evidence in support of this claim. Thus, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest* appear to have been deemed particularly suitable plays for retelling to children, and the Witches in *Macbeth* are retained intact, Richmond implies, because they fit in with children's enjoyment of a fairy tale environment.

It is at this point that Richmond's book takes an unexpected direction, though one cryptically signaled in her Preface. As she explains, because of the number and variety of editions of the *Tales of Shakespeare* that were published in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, she will consider only a small selection, "based on the quality of the illustrations" (26). Any reader hoping for an unraveling of the complexities of the publishing history of this highly popular and influential book will be disappointed by this. The compensation is Richmond's discussions of various richly illustrated editions. She begins with two Victorian editions of *Tales*

(why is not explained). The first is an 1876 mid-Victorian edition with illustrations based upon twelve engravings of works originally in the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery. The publisher employed the process of “permanent photography” to do this, but Richmond makes no mention of it, nor does she refer to the 1905 Oxford edition that included a different set of sixteen engravings from the Boydell Gallery. This last was an Edwardian production and surely merits some kind of mention. Next is an edition of 1882 with 184 engravings designed by John Gilbert. These illustrations were redeployed, according to Richmond, from the 1858–1860 three-volume edition of Shakespeare by Howard Staunton made famous by Gilbert’s more than 800 designs. Whether Gilbert’s designs (originally engraved by the Dalziel Brothers) were re-engraved or reproduced through some other process is not mentioned. Here as elsewhere Richmond is vague about such details, an unfortunate drawback in a study that stresses the importance of the illustrations in the books it discusses.

With her discussion of Arthur Rackham’s illustrations for the 1899 edition published by Dent, we get close to the border of the Edwardian era, especially since Dent reissued Rackham’s work in the “Everyman for Young People Series” in 1906, and a deluxe edition of *Tales* with twelve colour illustrations by Rackham appeared three years later. The chapter continues with discussions of the illustrations by Norman M. Price (1905), A.E. Jackson (1918), Louis John Rhead (1918), Frank Godwin (1924), and Arthur Rackham, W. Heath Robinson, Edmund Dulac, and others (1914). The editions containing the work by Rhead and Godwin are American editions, and by including them, Richmond further stretches the term “Edwardian.” Unfortunately, the reader is not compensated by any analysis of anything that may be characteristically American and different in cultural context from British versions. However, as with the other material in the chapter, the reader is given a detailed commentary on many of the illustrations, a generous number of which are reproduced.

Having established this *modus operandi*, Richmond goes on in a series of chapters to discuss additional editions of *Tales*, in which the original material is expanded or given in selected form (Ch. 3); Victorian and Edwardian alternative retellings of Shakespeare (Chs. 4 and 5); retellings in schoolbooks (Ch. 6); and retellings in books designed for home libraries (Ch. 7). There is a great deal of valuable material in these chapters and much insightful commentary that will greatly expand our knowledge and understanding of just how significant a place Shakespeare had in children’s literature of the early twentieth century. Richmond’s Epilogue, however, strikes a salutary chord. While acknowledging various contemporary attempts to retell Shakespeare for children, Richmond suggests that children and young people generally are no longer getting exposure to Shakespeare anywhere near that of their Edwardian forbears.

Some readers will find reading Richmond’s book frustrating for its at times rather arbitrary choice of material to discuss; its failure to talk in any detailed way about the distinguishing features of the Edwardian period and why so many retellings of Shakespeare were published at this time; and the inclusion of American works without any careful attempt to discuss their cultural context. Some readers



will also question the opening sentence of Richmond's book (one that is echoed in the publisher's blurb): "William Shakespeare is widely recognized as one of the greatest writers in the world, but he is not generally discussed in relation to children's literature" (1). While this may have been true a decade or so ago, the statement leaves out of account the contributions by such other scholars as Richard Burt, Megan Lynn Isaac, Charles Frey, Janet Bottoms, Louise Harrington, and Naomi Miller, who since 1998 have sought to create an awareness of Shakespeare's presence in children's literature. These concerns aside, however, there is much to recommend Richmond's book, particularly its drawing attention to a large quantity of material, including illustrations, that supplements the central presence in the Victorian and Edwardian periods of the Lambs' *Tales* in its multifarious formats.

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