Book Reviews

STRANGE COMFORT: ESSAYS ON THE WORK OF MALCOLM LOWRY.
BY SHERRILL GRACE.
TALONBOOKS, 2009. 223 PAGES. $19.95.

Published simultaneously with a conference marking Malcolm Lowry's centenary, *Strange Comfort* collects twelve essays (two previously unpublished) written by Sherrill Grace over the span of thirty years. Undoubtedly one of Lowry's most careful and prolific scholars, Grace's two-fold position as both literary critic and editor results in a collection of significant depth and scope. The most intriguing and ultimately productive moments occur when Grace pauses to examine her position in relation to Lowry. These moments result in a fissure, a breakage of the traditional authoritative lines between author and subject, and in so doing recreate a Lowryian play with the autobiographical self. Grace emphasizes in her introduction the extent to which Lowry "was a profoundly autobiographical and subjective writer" and it is only with the "increased critical appreciation for the art of autobiography and the complexity of autobiographical narratives" that we have come to a fuller understanding of him (17).

Strange Comfort is as much a chronicle of Grace's evolution as a scholar and writer as it is a study of Lowry; it demonstrates a gradual interweaving of Lowry's autobiographical method into her rigorous critical and editorial work. Chapter 4, "'The Daily Crucifixion of the Post': Editing and Theorizing the Lowry Letters" (1989), documents a number of the editorial problems that Grace faced in collecting Lowry's letters for *Sursum Corda! The Collected Letters of Malcolm Lowry* (2 vols., 1995). She begins by aligning her editorial practice with D.F. McKenzie's "sociology of texts," where the editor "must take cognizance of authorial intentions, readers' uses, historical change, the symbolic function of signs, and the dynamic interrelation of all these factors in the effort to 'show the human presence in any recorded text'" (71). She then documents the challenges inherent in collecting the letters of a writer who wrote incessantly to recipients both real and fictional and who often integrated versions of his correspondence into his fictional works. Grace offers examples of the problematics of transcription with the letters that, sent or unsent, take on the forms of poetry.

Should such documents be published as poems or letters or both? In order to negotiate such variance Grace formulates a system of categorization to decipher Lowry's complex play between the biographical and the fictional. Grounding her practice and theorization of the tenuous space between these two categories in "speech genre theory," Mikhail Bakhtin's "metalinguistic categorization of discourse" (86), Grace ends the essay with her own letter to Lowry, written in 1989. Through this letter's jovial adoption of Lowry's own oft-repeated images, phrases and conundrums, Grace circles back at the end in an echo of Lowry's eternal return to a "sociology of texts" that acknowledges the "human presence" of both author and scholar—effectively bookending the essay with her self-positioning as an editor. This chapter foregrounds the strengths present in the whole collection by enacting in a very material way the kind of attentive, exacting and personal scholarship necessary in the study of an author who so wholly invested himself in his writings that any attempt to separate the two does a disservice to both.

Where *Strange Comfort* truly impresses is in the final essay, previously unpublished, entitled "Remembering Tomorrow: Lowry, War, and Under the Volcano" (2009). Grace attributes her return to Lowry's seminal text to the experience of teaching the novel in 2008–2009 and viewing it "through the eyes of a young generation of Lowry readers for whom war and terror have once again become oppressive realities in daily life" (190). She proposes a new way into the novel that prioritizes the act of remembering, and remembering war in particular, as shaping the "most important aspects of the narrative system" of a novel. This is an emboldened statement considering the importance that narrative systems had for Lowry and continue to have with scholarship on the novel. Her argument, however, eloquently supports this thesis by highlighting the importance of the wars of the twentieth century as they occur in memories and stories for all four main characters. Grace brings into her argument contemporary theorizations of memory, war and trauma by scholars such as Dominick LaCapra, Pierre Nora, Lawrence Kirmayer and Giorgio Agamben. Particularly striking is her use of Agamben's concept of "bare life" as a condition of being that reduces a person "to mere physical existence, stripped of all aspects of identity and value as a socio-political being and a citizen of a state with rights and subject-hood, and placed outside the law" (207). Agamben most notably discusses this condition in reference to the state to which Jewish people were reduced during the Holocaust. Grace takes up the concept in reference to an event in the First World War experienced by Geoffrey Firmin, Volcano's doomed central figure. Although

the story is related by Geoffrey's brother Hugh in sketchy detail, it concerns his responsibility for "an incident" that occurred upon the *S.S. Samaritan*, a ship where German prisoners were taken by the ship's stokers and burned alive in the furnace. The guilt from this incident, as Grace argues, followed Geoffrey for the rest of his life and contributed to the series of events that led him to his death at the end of the novel. She proposes that in the end Geoffrey lets himself transform into "bare life"—dispossessed of all markers of his identity, and therefore allowing him to be murdered and thrown into a ditch on suspicion of being a spy. Grace convincingly argues for a reading of the novel that highlights the dangers of moments when certain socio-political configurations allow for "bare life." It is here that she returns to the specificity of writing about war—that her own autobiography echoes back into her argument when she writes that Agamben "predicts that unless democracies stop betraying basic principles of law, human rights, and freedom (in places like Guantanamo or detainee camps—not POW camps, as defined by the Geneva Convention—in Afghanistan) a state of exception will become the 'dominant paradigm' for handing 'global civil war'" (208). This is striking—and important—because here, at the end of a collection of essays that encapsulates a career of scholarship, Grace's analysis of Lowry speaks directly to contemporary concerns, highlighting the extent to which his work can offer twenty-first-century readers and scholars ways through which to view our particular historical moment, not in isolation from history, but rather as part of a Lowryian "eternal return" to ethical, philosophical and, ultimately, human concerns.

VANESSA LENT, DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

A GLASS SHARD AND MEMORY.
BY J.J. STEINFIELD.
CALGARY: RECLINER BOOKS, 2010. 241 PAGES. $18.95.

J.J. Steinfeld is in fine fettle with his first collection of short stories since *Would You Hide Me?* (2003). In between there were poetry collections (2006, 2009) and a novel, *Word Burials* (2009). However, with nine short story collections published between 1983 and 2003, one can appreciate readers' high expectations of *A Glass Shard and Memory*. Offering a stage gallery of diverse characters, including an inter-sexed figure, disoriented criminals and lonely nonagenarians, this much-anticipated collection does not disappoint.

There are twenty-eight stories in this volume, making it even more capacious than *Dancing at the Club Holocaust* (1993). In his comments on the 1993 collection, Michael Greenstein worried over Steinfeld's vision getting swallowed up by the Holocaust, and the risks this could present for the scope of future work (*The Dalhousie Review* 73.1). *A Glass Shard and Memory* continues Steinfeld's observance of Holocaust memory—most noticeably in the first and final stories that address themes, developed throughout the collection, of "memory [being] real" (37), "awaiting the past" (105), and "questioning history" (226). Autodiegetic storytelling in thirteen of the stories is crucial to Steinfeld's expansive "chronicl[ing] of the human condition" (199). A rich variety of first-person narrators deliver their stories as dramatic monologues, which have the combined effect of offering up a series of lively vignettes.

In "Alternative Endings," Nadine Gordimer says: "Asked about how fiction writers bring their imagined characters to life, Graham Greene said writers create alternative lives for people they might have encountered, sat beside on a bus, overheard in loving or quarrelsome exchange on a beach, in a bar, grinning instead of weeping at a funeral, shouting at a political meeting. A writer also picks up an imagined life at some stage in the human cycle and leaves it at another." The following considers the workings of character in the title story, "A Glass Shard and Memory"—a story first published in a previous issue of *The Dalhousie Review* (86.1)—focusing on the particular features of what James Phelan calls "character narration"—"exploring a range of effects that follow from narration by a [Steinfeld] character."

The character-narrator "picks up an imagined life" (Steinfeld's) as a scholar adept at reading Steinfeld's own work, given that the narrator specializes in "the modern European short story" (1). He was born in Munich, as was Steinfeld, "many years ago, a few months after the War had ended, the Second World War. Munich, I was born in Munich, to Polish-Jewish parents" (6). In bed with a female interlocutor he meets in a hotel bar during a literary conference, the narrator refers to a familiar Steinfeld story, the title story of his collection, *The Apostate's Tattoo* (1983), which he recalls vividly: "'I read a story about a man, a professor, a tormented history professor, who went to a tattoo parlour and had a concentration camp number put on his forearm—his mother's number,' I say, more like delivering a lecture. She asks who the author is and I tell her I can't remember for the life of me, but the title of the story I'd never forget: 'The Apostate's Tattoo'" (9). Playfully, Steinfeld figures himself directly in this story in relation to the protagonist.

The woman in bed—“a poet, [who] had just published her fifth book, a book about making love after the cessation of hostilities” (7)—is, like the narrator, a child of Holocaust survivors. However, where he is reticent, she readily reveals her family’s Holocaust background. The hotel-room conversation about apostasy continues: “She smiles, because her father called himself an apostate [a person who forsakes his religion or cause], but an alter kocker [in Leo Rosten’s translation, “(Vulgarism) A crotchety, fussy, ineffectual old man”] apostate. Never lost his Yiddish accent, she says. Neither did my mother or father, I think, but do not say aloud” (9). The unlikely dialogue between strangers resembles the sharing of much repeated, recalibrated family lore; the professor’s mother in the same spirit recasts an account of family “television demolition … like a cautionary fairy tale, changing the story slightly for each telling” (1).

The glass shard in the title—a motif throughout the collection—causes a cut to the narrator’s hand. Before leaving for the conference, he deliberately breaks the television screen in his family home, causing injury to himself, and then breaks the television in his hotel room. Breaking the screen repeats his father’s traumatizing action during his childhood, when his father kicked in the television during *The Howdy Doody Show*—the father imagining the romping beat of its theme song as “the [sound of] marching soldiers in [Nazi-occupied] Poland” (2). Undergoing a mental collapse, the narrator is also getting off “the academic horse” (5) when he can neither deliver his conference paper, nor, ironically, “for the life of [him]” remember Steinfeld’s name as author of “The Apostate’s Tattoo.”

What seems most important is that the narrator remembers Steinfeld’s story rather than its author’s name. Echoing his father’s kicking through the screen of postwar North American consumptive forgetfulness, and his inability to deliver his conference paper, both relate to his unease with reaching into past horror. He wants to “tell her my mother had also been in Auschwitz … I am unable to reveal that fact of history,” he notes (10). Told entirely in the present tense, the story leaves open the possibility of his drawing the future differently on the basis of engaging the past. Communicating on “the dangerous trail” (9) while making love with the woman who considers their “meeting … not an accident” (9), his remark “about losing [him]self in an academic world of writing about the writings of others”(2) is salient.

Steinfeld abandoned his PhD studies in history at the University of Ottawa in 1980 to become a fiction writer, poet, and playwright; his character-

narrator reveals what Steinfeld might have become had he not chosen to make his way toward becoming a writer in a secluded harbour, Charlottetown. The results of his journey were immediate, judging by Karin Beeler's attesting to the importance of *The Apostate's Tattoo* for her *Tattoos, Desire and Violence: Marks of Resistance in Literature, Film and Television* (2006). As one of the character-narrators in *A Glass Shard and Memory* proclaims, while loosening the shackles of familial obligation, fiction-writing can be enabling: "I have a short story to finish … I can look after myself" (222).

SANDRA SINGER, UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH

SWIMMING GINGER.
BY GARY GEDDES.
GOOSE LANE EDITIONS, 2010. 223 PAGES. $19.95.

Swimming Ginger, Gary Geddes' eighteenth collection of poetry, is a beautiful book. From its centre a print of the twelfth-century Qingming Shanghe Tu Scroll unfolds. Geddes takes a scroll that, for most viewers, would be merely attractive, and uses it to reveal secrets of the ancient Chinese city, Bianliang, secrets full of wisdom and heartbreak that reveal our own unease.

This unusual scroll, rather than depict the customary landscape of mountains and forests, shows an urban setting peopled with labourers and merchants. In poems with wonderful momentum, *Swimming Ginger* gives voice to the figures on the scroll, anonymous men and women without privilege or power. It is Geddes' accomplishment to have poetic control of such an enormous and unwieldy topic.

We are shown that in this scroll, "Girls with baskets of sandalwood / their silk scarves the colour / of autumn grasses, are / more important than emperors"—an observation that holds true today, glimpses of familiar beauty affecting us most deeply.

The book begins with "Apothecary," a poem in which the voice is at once vernacular and wise, full of complaints, yet humorous and dynamic. A girl who works in the ginger mill speaks next, in the eponymous poem, "Swimming Ginger." Here, and throughout the book, we glimpse how punishing life is for those without protection or wealth.

> Though I dress like a man
> And learn to hold the steering oar
> hard to starboard for hauling

upriver, I know the time is brief
before my belly starts to swell
and the merciless raptors single

me out, pick up the scent.

In “The Storyteller” a young man infuriates a widow during an assignation when he critiques her poems. He gives

_____ the advice of Ouyang Xiu: Sing
as if narrating, narrate

as if singing. You arrogant imp, she
shouted after me. Walk-as-if-running …

We hear from a son who sacrifices for his selfish father, only to have his own young son

Crushed
under a chariot wheel. Tiny hand
tucked neatly into mine walking
along the riverbank, pausing
to toss stones in the lazy current

or leading me to the sweet-cake
vendor.

The voice of the painter, in the last section of the book, is the conscience that fuels the book:

What’s ‘clear’
And ‘bright’ to me is hypocrisy,

so-called wise men, toadies,
dickering in broad daylight over
the tender flesh and innocence
of children.

This in the voice of a twelfth-century man, yet his words call to mind current brutalities and bring the enterprise into the present day. In “Silk River” the painter reflects on art and artists and, hence, writers. His comments are witheringly relevant for us:

As a Chan
monk clears his mind for mediation, so
artists employ space to empty the eye

of all but what is there on soil, paper,
stone

As long as we paint there'll be collectors,
Hacks, myriad critics, each wishing, by
Association, to be remembered.

Writing, deemed the road to status:
illusion of control. Scholars, bureaucrats,
trashed by each new dynasty.

COMPLETE PHYSICAL.
BY SHANE NEILSON.
THE PORCUPINE'S QUILL, 2010. 64 PAGES. $14.95.

Complete Physical is Shane Neilson's third book. The best poems in this collection retain their mystery, as in "Ode to Stealth," where Neilson, addressing his stethosocope, writes:

you are my symbol,
a black scarf,
and I marshal your lanky muscle,
try your bendable will,
but you are not tameable,
you seek what you seek.

The stethoscope seems to be the wisest oracle in *Complete Physical*. "Secrets my Stethoscope Told Me" ends with "You'll go mad if you listen too long."

We see how closely Neilson, both poet and doctor, listens to his patients, and how much he cares about them. "The Death of Leo Emberson, November 2006" is a wonderful depiction of a plucky, much-loved patient. In "Death of Josie" we see what the poet observed and how well he listened, how he looked down her throat and "saw through the smoke."

Neilson can be both humorous and poignant, as in "The Missed Appointment": "Was there a kiss? Did you hit a car? Did the roads jigsaw / and you ended back?"

His priestly stance in poems is less successful. In “Curing Blindness” he tells us: “I am priestly: leveraging hope and faith and that grand panacea, love against death / ... what I tell you is like connecting dots: there are points of light, / and if you cannot see them, I will heal your blindness.” Such a stance, too distant and omnipotent, makes both patient and reader wary.

A similar problem arises in “On Conducting Complete Physicals”: “If love were my diagnostic quarry / I’d hunt it like Cupid, / readying my quiver: Have you ever been in love?... It seems to me a more pertinent question / than the latest burp or cough.” Here the wise talks to the less wise. His allusions can stretch as well and offer unsatisfying results:

> “I hate this season/with good reason
> as I watch the Grinch
> steal health from the little Whos.
> Will he give it back?”(“Dr. Grinch”)

But when Neilson leaves this role behind, and takes on mystery and faith, he is a strong poet: “And there has been love, I have been in love with this, I have heard secrets never told, and touched when touch seemed like all there was.”

CAROLE LANGILLE, DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

PLANTERS, PAUPERS, AND PIONEERS: ENGLISH SETTLERS IN ATLANTIC CANADA.
BY LUCILLE H. CAMPEY.
TORONTO: DUNDURN PRESS, 2010. 470 PAGES. $35.00.

Lucille Campey’s study of English emigration to Atlantic Canada’s colonial antecedents has sharp contemporary resonance: migrants, often recruited and subsidized at state expense, arrive in the region and are struck by its relative underdevelopment. Many stay only briefly before continuing on to richer prospects in urban central Canada and the United States. Some try for years to avail themselves of the region’s limited economic opportunities before joining long-established inhabitants on the path of outmigration. A relative few establish a modest competency through years of effort and become accepted members of compact provincial societies. As Campey shows, patterns that characterize migration to Atlantic Canada today have clear

historical analogues and precedents. The relative smallness of the resource base, the difficulty of the climate, and proximity to larger, richer, and more temperate jurisdictions vex the region's prospects today in part because they have shaped the region in the past and continue to do so in the present.

This volume, the first of three intended to trace the full history of English emigration to the territories comprising present-day Canada, presents a useful synthesis of several generations of popular and academic research into ethnically specific settlement in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland. It has a satisfyingly broad chronological sweep, extending from the earliest sponsored settlement attempts in seventeenth-century Newfoundland to the experiences of Home Children in early twentieth-century Nova Scotia. It examines the European economic, social, and cultural contexts informing individual decisions to migrate as fully as those of the North American societies that received them. Campey's extensive archival research allows her to consistently enliven abstract processes of historical change with the vivid experiences of migrants themselves. The book's many historical images are well integrated into the text, and are supplemented with schematic maps and photographs prepared for volume itself. Its full scholarly apparatus includes appendices, notes, and extensive bibliographies. By focusing on the experiences of a single ethnic community over a span of several centuries, the book represents a real contribution to the historiography of Atlantic Canada.

While Campey's work is methodologically rigorous it does not, however, consistently engage questions or theoretical approaches that are in the forefront of Atlantic Canada studies today. While she acknowledges her debt to Bernard Bailyn's *Voyagers to the West* in her analysis of Yorkshire settlement in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, for example, she is little influenced by the comparative and transnational Atlantic World perspectives Bailyn has advocated more recently, and that scholars including Stephen Hornsby and Elizabeth Mancke have applied fruitfully to colonial Atlantic Canada. As a result Campey's perspective can underestimate the impact of English migration on the region's development. John Reid, for example, has shown how demographic shifts attendant on the Loyalist influx permanently altered power relations among ethnic groups in the region with consequences that remain potent today; this is not reflected in Campey's work. More generally, her decision to treat migrations from both England itself and from British American colonies as equally "English" is problematic. Her generalization

that British American migrants were ethnically and to an extent culturally English, despite their long residence in America, is difficult to sustain. This is most evident in the case of the Loyalists, who are treated as uniformly English despite their well-documented ethnic diversity. Recent work on the cultural and philosophical underpinnings of Loyalism might help bridge this gap, as might Linda Colley's influential work on the contemporary emergence of British identity, but Campey's analysis seems uninfluenced by this scholarship. Likewise a large body of scholarly work has recently been published on Planter and Loyalist migrations, and this is not adequately reflected in Campey's book. The author also suggests that the English (as compared to the Scots or Irish) are in a sense Canada's "invisible" settlers, a suggestion belied by the prevalent Anglophilia of many of Canada's institutions and much of its historiography (outside of Quebec, at least) until the 1930s.

Despite its strong archival research and scholarly equipment this book is not addressed solely or even primarily to academics. Its status as one of three proposed volumes suggests that it is intended as a general reference work, and it succeeds as such. Its chapter divisions follow administrative jurisdiction rather than chronology, which will prove especially useful to genealogists. Genealogists will likewise be the main beneficiaries of many of the book's tables and appendices, which include passenger lists from immigrant ships arriving in the region from English ports, lists of indentured servants, of Birt and Middlemore Home Children, their places of origin, and the Atlantic Canadian communities in which they were received. Campey's consistent emphasis on conditions in English regions contributing migrants will assist North American researchers seeking information about European ancestors, as will her extensive bibliographies of English primary source material and her listing of English archives, museums, and local history institutions. Her community-by-community analyses of the size and timing of particular migrations, and of the development of economic activities and cultural institutions therein (primarily Anglican and Methodist places of worship, and schools) will provide European researchers with a sound introduction to the dynamics of colonial society.

Planters, Paupers, and Pioneers is most successful as a practical and well-documented manual for those seeking information on particular communities and migrations, and as a guide to further information sources relevant to these. While it skilfully synthesizes much existing scholarship to depict the nature of colonial societies and the broad historical processes affecting them,

it neglects emerging work that offers perspectives that challenge orthodox readings of events such as the Loyalist migration. With its forthcoming companion volumes it will offer a sound overview of English migration to Canada, and will undoubtedly act as spur to further researches in both genealogical and academic literatures.

ROGER MARSTERS, DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY