

Quill & Quire

OCTOBER 2020

David A. Robertson

The Winnipeg writer rules the season with a trio of books honouring his Cree heritage PAGE 18

Kidlit Special

New work from Sam Maggs, plus illustrators to watch, and Sarah Roughley on writing while Black

PAGE 21

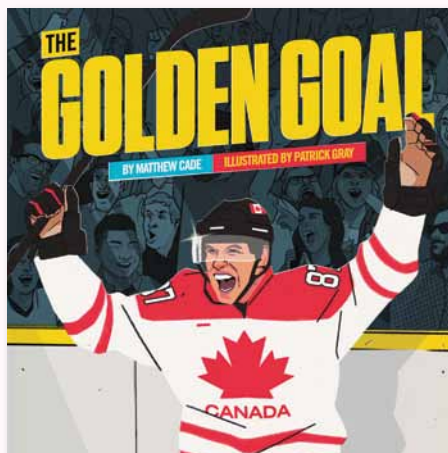
NEW CAN LIT

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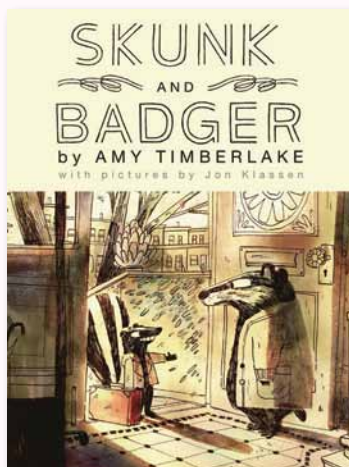
Ages 4-8

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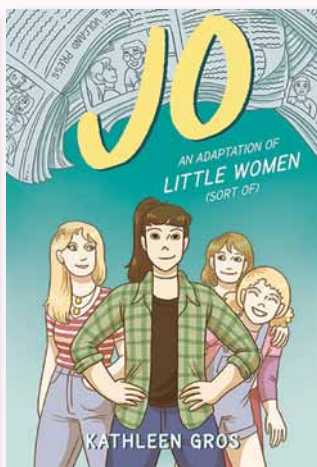
Ages 6-10

The first in a graphic chapter book series for fans of *Narwhal* and *Jelly*



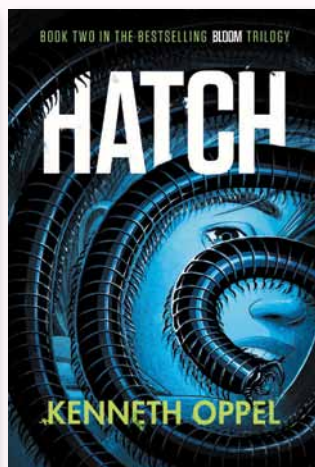
Ages 8-12

A new modern classic with art by beloved illustrator Jon Klassen



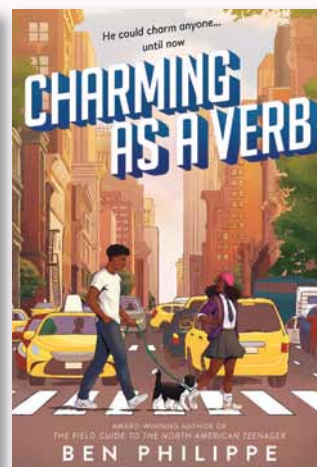
Ages 8-12

A contemporary graphic novel adaptation of *Little Women* (sort of)



Ages 10-14

The second book in the explosive Bloom trilogy



Ages 13+

A whip-smart romantic comedy with two Black leads, for fans of Nicola Yoon



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How academic Suzanne Evans uncovered the forgotten story behind a POW's cookbook



▲ COVER Cree/Ojibway/British award-winning artist and sculptor KC Adams (above) braved the Seine River mosquitoes to shoot Winnipeg author David A. Robertson. Adams – whose own book, *Perception: A Photo Series (Portage and Main)*, was a 2019 Q&Q Book of the Year – was set designer for the acclaimed Royal Winnipeg Ballet's *Going Home Star: Truth and Reconciliation*. kcadams.net

EDITOR'S NOTE

Change in the air

I CAN'T TELL YOU how many people sent me a link to a *Guardian* story written by Alex Cook about the overwhelming number of books flooding the market this fall because of COVID-19 delays. Sept. 3, in particular, will see close to 600 new titles vying for space on retailer shelves in the U.K. We'll be talking to Canadian booksellers about their particular concerns and predictions for this fall at quillandquiere.com.

Although the pressure on this season feels particularly acute, I think I can speak for my fellow Q&Q editors in saying that every fall is overwhelming as we survey all the new releases and wonder how we'll ever possibly read, let alone cover, all the titles we'd like to in an ideal world. While Cook sends a warning that it is indie presses and marginalized authors who will be affected most negatively over the glut, our review sections, starting on page 26, highlight an intriguing selection of books from a variety of publishers and writers. I also had the opportunity for this issue to interview Halifax-based debut author Francesca Ekwuyasi (page 6), whose gorgeous novel, *Butter Honey Pig Bread*, was pulled from the slush pile at Arsenal Pulp Press, known for launching such stars as Vivek Shraya and Téa Mtonji. I sincerely hope Ekwuyasi's lyrical, assured voice also finds an audience – and maybe some award nominations – as this book deserves attention.

In September, we profiled Hush Harbour, a new Black feminist publishing house, and in this issue, we introduce a new column by its founders (page 9) that will document their journey of starting a press from scratch. Moving forward, you'll find the column monthly at quillandquiere.com.

Despite all these exciting happenings and no end of books to read, there is also a tinge of sadness that our usual markers for the fall turning – Coach House Books' raucous Wayzgoose party, the bustle of Word on the Street – are virtual fests to be enjoyed from our living rooms this year. (Kudos to all event organizers on making it work.) But one marker remains the same: our annual fall Kidlit Special, which kicks off on page 18 with an emotional profile – written by our associate editor, Ryan Porter – of Winnipeg author David A. Robertson, who has an astonishing three books out this season. Our Books for Young People editor Shanda Deziel did her usual bang-up job of spotlighting some creators whose names you'll want to remember whether you're out perusing your favourite indie bookstore or browsing fall's riches from home.



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Quill & Quire

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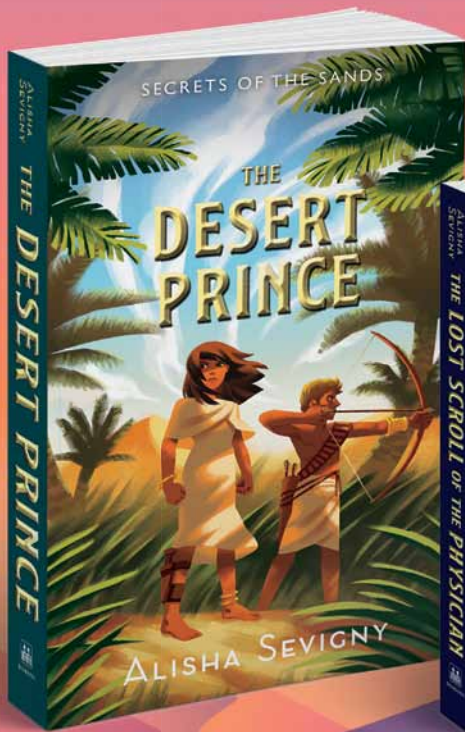


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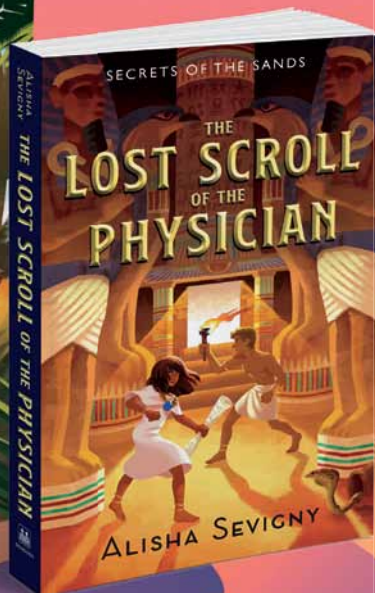
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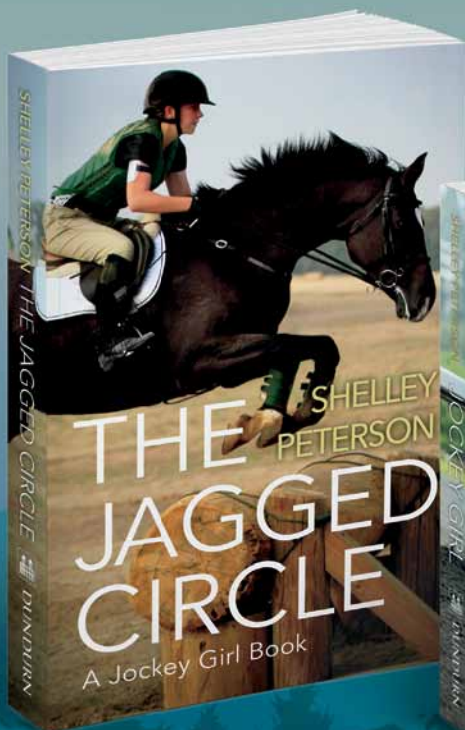
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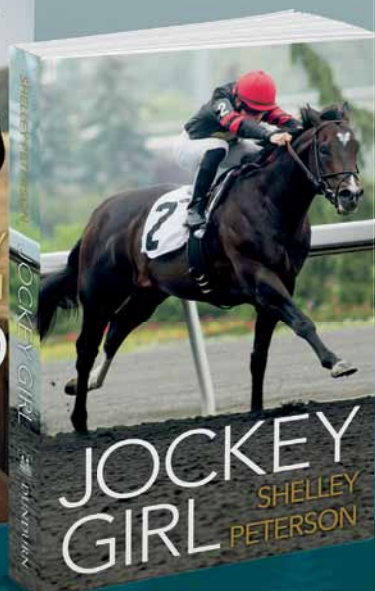
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DUNDURN

A press from scratch

Introducing a new column by the founders of Hush Harbour

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A tough act to swallow

Réjean Ducharme's debut is finally available in a new English translation

PAGE 10

The right person to tell the story

Bestsellers by Eden Robinson and Thomas King hit the small screen this fall

PAGE 12

Frontmatter



PROFILE

Between many worlds

Francesca Ekwuyasi's sensual debut novel melds Nigerian folklore with a personal journey to make connections **BY SUE CARTER**

WHEN FRANCESCA EKWUYASI arrived in Halifax seven years ago to pursue her masters in international development studies at Saint Mary's University, "it took awhile to get an invitation for tea." Though it's a city that prides itself on Maritime hospitality, Halifax can be a tough place to make meaningful connections, especially during those bitterly cold winter months when no one wants to venture outside, let alone

make new friends. Despite the beautiful ocean views, Ekwuyasi was lonely and ready to pack it in before she finally found her people.

That tension of being attracted to a place or thing while urgently seeking escape from it runs through Ekwuyasi's stunning debut novel, *Butter Honey Pig Bread*, a cosmopolitan, multigenerational saga published by Vancouver's Arsenal Pulp Press, which blends Nigerian folklore with

a queer love story. Twin sisters Kehinde and Taiye are estranged following a childhood trauma that reveals itself late in the story, yet the two are still connected in spiritual and physical ways. Both have left behind their home in Lagos, Nigeria, eventually residing a short flight from each other in Canada: Taiye abandoning a hedonistic life in the U.K. to attend culinary school in Halifax while Kehinde, now engaged to be married, pursues a career as an artist in Montreal.

Taiye's discovery of Halifax, and appreciation for its complicated history and landscape, is similar to Ekwuyasi's own journey. "I was trying to find the beauty," she says. Her process for writing her characters' lives is also very similar to how she discovers a place. There is a lot of walking around, thinking, and observing.

Ekwuyasi began writing in 2013 while back in Nigeria to do a mandatory one-year stint in the country's National Youth Service Corps after finishing her degree at the State University of New York. While waiting for her Canadian visa to arrive, Ekwuyasi spent a lot of time in the library of her youth – which was much smaller than she recalled. There she picked up a copy of Teju Cole's 2011 novel, *Open City*, which follows Julius, a Nigerian psychiatry student, as he wanders through the streets of New York. She was also reading a lot of folklore, including stories of the Ogbanje – reborn spirit children who cause grief to their families, comparable to European stories of changelings. In *Butter Honey Pig Bread*, Taiye and Kehinde are reunited in Lagos after more than a decade with their mother, Kambirinachi, who has believed her entire life that she is an Ogbanje. She is also convinced she has passed on that legacy of misfortune to her children, who in one scene experience a celestial moment with each other, despite their estrangement. Twins are also popular figures in Nigerian folklore.

"A lot of Nigerian books I read as a kid were about twins and spirituality and deities. There was lots of wrath," Ekwuyasi says. "But during

my research for the book, the more I got into it, the more I realized I didn't know how much I needed to know."

While living in Halifax – despite her initial misgivings, it's the city that Ekwuyasi has lived the longest as an adult – she began submitting stories to journals; her story "Orun Is Heaven" for *GUTS* landed on the 2019 Journey Prize longlist. She kept busy with other pursuits, too. She exhibited intricate paper-cut sculptures at a local artist-run centre and produced several



documentaries, including a series capturing the experiences of other Black Haligonians.

Ekwuyasi quietly continued writing *Butter Honey Pig Bread*, despite the fact that she didn't have any plans for publication. "I was just following my interests," she says. "A lot of ideas were falling into place though I didn't know how they would work out." That includes food: the book is filled with lingering scenes of meal preparation. "I love to cook and to read about food and watch shows about food," Ekwuyasi says. "I really wanted the book to feel sensual, separate from sex."

On a friend's recommendation, Ekwuyasi sent an unsolicited partial draft to Arsenal Pulp Press. She was familiar with the publisher, which has a reputation for spotting rising talents, through her job at Venus Envy, a sex shop and bookstore. "I really liked what they produce and how they support their writers," she says.

Around the time she learned that Arsenal Pulp wanted her manuscript, Ekwuyasi lost her Canadian work permit for bureaucratic reasons (she's now a permanent resident). She was worried for her future and whether she could finish the book for her new publisher. But all worked out: the city, the connections, and the writing.

"This is my dream come true," Ekwuyasi says.



▲ Ian Gill and Zoe Grams

NEWS

Treasured island

Vancouver's new bookshop and event space is dedicated to the art of storytelling **BY SUE CARTER**

IT BEGAN WITH the perfect location. Late in fall 2019, author and conservationist Ian Gill and Zoe Grams, founder of the literary marketing agency ZG Stories, discovered a vacant retail storefront on Vancouver's culturally rich Granville Island and knew it was destined to become their bookstore.

The two-storey former jewellery studio checked all the boxes. It's located on Railspur Alley – a quiet strip of artisan shops housing a letterpress shop, artist boutiques, and a sake producer that is removed from the bustle of the island's famous Granville Market. It's also close to the Vancouver Writers Fest head office (where Grams serves as the festival's marketing director) and its cluster of performance venues (for whenever physical book events are held again). Although there are various specialty shops that carry books in the touristy area, Granville Island has been without a dedicated bookshop since Blackberry Books closed its doors in 2014 after 35 years in business.

"The idea came pretty fully formed. We recognize the incredible publishing and book-seller ecosystem that we have in Vancouver with amazing independent bookstores. But there's always room for more," says Grams. "For us, the idea of launching a literary-arts space, where we're amplifying storytelling and contributing to Vancouver's appreciation of literature and stories, was a really exciting one."

Keeping their plans under wraps, the business partners quietly signed a lease, telling only a few friends. In early July, their news was publicly announced. Scheduled to open in late August, Upstart & Crow will act as a traditional bookstore, offering gift packages, book-club subscriptions, and literary-inspired artwork by local artists. Once COVID-19 physical-distancing restrictions are lifted, the small, private second floor will eventually accommodate a writer's studio loft for a residency program.

According to Grams, that is currently the only space in the shop that isn't accessible. The ground floor features an entrance off the sidewalk, and as part of their renovations, the washroom is being modified to ensure accessibility at public events. The tables are all handmade, and Grams's father created the wooden bookcases and ladder from scratch.

On the retail side, Grams says the shop will prioritize works by indie presses and international fiction that doesn't necessarily top the bestseller lists. Equally as important is the intent of the business's creative side to "support the storytellers and to support the writers, poets, or artists who are contributing to our literary community," she says. Gill, who has written several books about B.C.'s Haida Gwaii region, says several partnerships are in the works with West Coast Indigenous communities looking to improve literacy in their communities.

Upstart & Crow's gallery spaces will launch with a commissioned series, where the artists create works inspired by books they admire. "We've also been in conversation with some artists who are also authors to potentially exhibit their works, too," says Grams. "It's a work in progress, but we plan to have a rotating gallery in both the upstairs and the downstairs spaces that connects literary and visual art."

The shop's name came from Gill, who back in the 1980s discussed opening a bookstore called Upstart & Crow with his mother in his native Australia. When Gill moved to Canada, his mom, who has since passed away, adopted the name for her landscaping business.

"It feels like a way to honour that ambition that we had together, which I now feel with Zoe," says Gill. "It's a full circle."

Rising rents and real-estate costs have resulted in a dearth of book-launch venues for Vancouver publishers, but Gill and Grams are hoping to help fill the void. They also imagine



▲ Upstart & Crow

curating their own events that could, for instance, combine books with a culinary experience from a local chef or teach participants the basics of letterpress printing.

"We've designed the space so that it can be fairly versatile: bookstore by day, events space by night," says Grams. "That sense of energy and welcoming people in is definitely a big part of what we're going to do."

Side notes



Nafiza Azad ▲

4

Authors to be featured per year in the FOLD Kids Young Readers Book Club, beginning with Nafiza Azad

\$25,000

Donation the Giller Foundation made to both the Indigenous Literary Studies Association and Diaspora Dialogues, non-profits that support BIPOC writers

50

Per cent decline in annual revenue that the Association of Book Publishers of B.C. is projecting for the province's publishers

905

Minutes that 200 Grade 5 students in Peel Region spent reading as part of the Raptors 905 Summer Reading Challenge

25

Per cent of Canadian households that don't own a book, according to First Book Canada, which aimed to donate 100,000 children's books this summer

19

Per cent of books sold in independent bookstores that are written by Canadians, according to More Canada

AGONY EDITOR

Suffer for nothing

Don't set your book during COVID-19 just to be trendy

Dear Agony Editor,
I recently completed the first draft of a contemporary novel. Given everything going on in the world right now, I'm considering going back and setting my novel during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Do you think this could help me generate more interest from potential publishers?
Signed,
Sign o' the Times

Dear Sign o' the Times, I'm giving you a hard "nope" to that. While I understand the temptation to increase the marketability of your book, you're going about it the wrong way. Whenever you introduce a plot point or setting in the name of getting your book sold, a little red light should go off in your head. That's because the same little red light will go off in your readers' heads. It's a signal that you're not being authentic in your work and trying to capitalize on a trend or current issue. And a reader will sniff that a mile away.

That's not to say you can't set your book during COVID-19, but that idea should've been there from the start. There needs to be

an artistic reason for its inclusion. I spoke to a senior editor at a large publishing house for her feedback. "Getting published is a lot more complex than just changing the setting of a novel," she says. "For me, the attraction to a manuscript is, ultimately, about the quality of the writing and the originality of the story. I would not suggest changing the setting to the time of COVID-19 unless that change somehow fundamentally enhances the overall quality of the manuscript. If it's just a cosmetic change for the sake of seeming 'timely,' I wouldn't bother."

This editor also points to something that many of us are suffering from: COVID-19 fatigue. I don't know what books you are reading, but I could certainly use an escape from what's going on right now. "Maybe a few years into the future, people will become interested in revisiting this time," she said. But right now, and given the uncertainty about everything, you run the risk of turning publishers – and readers – away. If I were you, I'd stick to your original setting. Good luck and stay safe.



Brian Francis (brian-francis.com) is the author of *Natural Order*, *Fruit*, and *Break in Case of Emergency*.

Have a question for Brian?

Email info@quillandquire.com

COLUMN

A press from scratch

In a new monthly column, Alannah Johnson and Whitney French chart the launch of Hush Harbour Press

WHY A HUSH HARBOUR? Hush Harbour Press is an intersectional publishing house, co-founded by Alannah Johnson and Whitney French, envisioning Black futures through literary and sonic storytelling with an emphasis on the revival of short fiction. In June 2020, Hush Harbour announced its arrival as the newest literary press in Canada.

/həSH 'hərbər/

“[A] nighttime gathering where a discrete space would be chosen by the amount of trees in that area. A branch would be broken by the first person there and everyone would know to go in that direction. There would be quilts put up to muffle and soundproof the space and what would happen in these temporary spaces would be planning resistance, storytelling, gossiping and a place to just be that was in ways a small taste of freedom.” —*Blacknesses Between Us*, Vol. 1, Bisha Mohamed and Ashai Nicolas, 2016

This year, we at Hush Harbour Press embarked on our own journey toward liberation. Launching on June 22 – a date chosen to honour and celebrate the legacy of Octavia E. Butler – Hush Harbour reflects on the historical and symbolic roots of our namesake by carving out a space for a particular type of liberation. It requires us to hold space for storytelling, memory, resistance, and existence.

Deeply inspired by multidisciplinary performance artist Camille Turner and her remarkable work *HUSH HARBOUR* (a sonic walk project outlining Black histories and geographies by using archival and Afrofuturistic imagining), we envision our press to be one of many gathering places for Black people in Canada and across the diaspora. We draw guidance from Turner and so many other Black feminists, including the now-shuttered publisher Sister Vision Press, who fearlessly explore the complexities of Black life in Canada. No doubt, the task of building a press is a massive undertaking, not simply in publishing and selling books but also in continuing the rich, nuanced, often erased or invisible legacy of Black writing in this country.

Before we announced the press to the world, we practiced starbursting, an alternative to brainstorming that doesn't require solutions. In these columns, we want to explicitly share some of the tools that are helping us shape the press,



▲ Octavia Butler

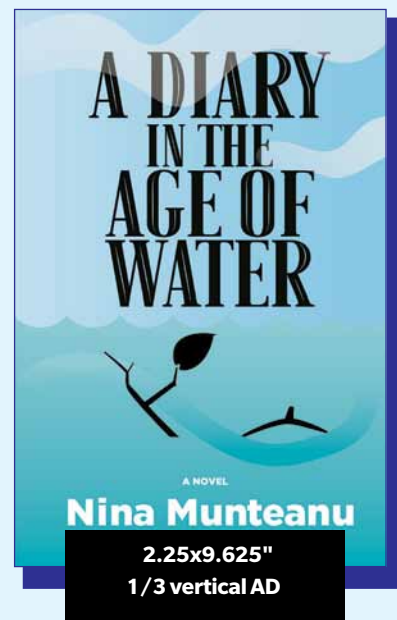
beginning with this concept. Starbursting is a tool we use to invite authentic collaboration. It can include partnering with another organization and offering room for thoughtful pause, layered ideas, and experimentation. It can focus on decentering power in our decision-making processes. Although we are not naive to the notion that collaboration doesn't always work, it is integral to support each other's energy. It gives us a fighting chance journeying forward. And when we think about stars as a continuum, it makes a lot of sense for Black peoples: we would follow the North Star, seeking liberation; we would gather in our hush harbours under starlight. More recently, our literary ancestor Octavia E. Butler reminds us in *Parable of the Sower* that “our destiny is to take root among the stars.”

Starting a press from scratch begins, for us, with a name. One that can hold the intentions of our vision, one that carries the weight of legacy we've inherited, and one that points us toward futures we wish to live in. As this series continues, we will share the nuts and bolts of getting a press started: how we develop systems and frameworks; what our ethics and politics look like in the day-to-day and in our editorial process. It all begins with the act of naming. We invite you into our Hush Harbour.

In resistance,
Alannah and Whitney

This article is the first part of a series that will appear at quillandquire.com and at hushharbour.com, where you'll find more information and ways to financially support the press.

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▲ Réjean Ducharme

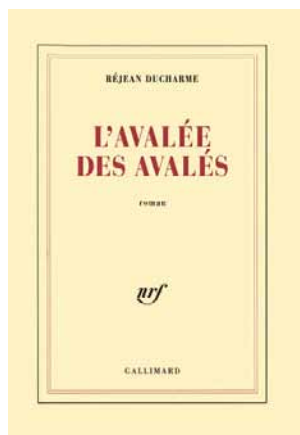
NEWS

A tough act to swallow

A new English translation of Réjean Ducharme's challenging first novel addresses a significant cultural omission **BY STEVEN W. BEATTIE**

MADELINE STRATFORD IS IN A WEIRD PLACE with her relationship to her latest project, a translation of legendary Quebec writer Réjean Ducharme's first novel. "You reach a point when you translate – or write a book, I assume – where it doesn't seem to be yours anymore. It has a life of its own. It becomes alive."

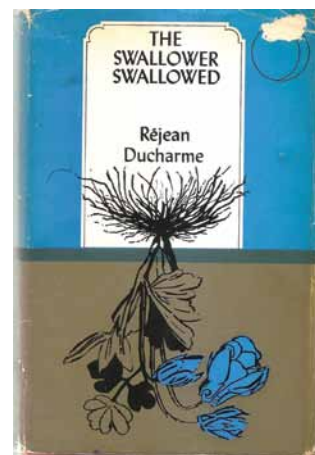
In this case, the nature of the translator's relationship to the work is particularly fraught, given the fractured, disaffected, vaguely nihilistic psyche of Berenice, the girl whose stream of consciousness, first-person narration lies at the centre of Ducharme's novel. Written in the 1960s, when the Quebec author was only 23, *L'Avalée des avalés*, newly translated as *Swallowed*, appeared so strange and uncomfortable that publishers in the young author's home province wouldn't touch it. In what amounted to a last-ditch effort, Ducharme sent his manuscript to Gallimard, the Paris publisher responsible for bringing out many of the most important French writers of the 20th century. The Gallimard edition of the book appeared in 1966, sealing the reputation of the author, who went on to write a clutch of other novels, screenplays, and plays, winning three Governor General's Literary Awards in the process.



Part of the reason for the early resistance to the book was its unconventional approach to language, says Dimitri Nasrallah, fiction editor at Esplanade Books, the imprint of Montreal's Véhicule Press that is publishing the new translation of Ducharme's novel this fall. The original French-language text comprised a challenging combination of Joycean wordplay and an argot that was specific to the Quebec milieu the author hailed from. "For the first time you have, literally, a book being written in Québécois as opposed to just French," Nasrallah says of *L'Avalée*

des avalés. "Berenice is the vehicle for this voice and this thought process, which is markedly un-French in the Parisian sense."

The novel has been translated into English once before, in 1968. The translator was Barbara Bray, an Englishwoman who had also translated the work of Marguerite Duras, Jean Genet, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Bray's translation



was never published domestically in Canada and has been out of print for many years. When Nasrallah first approached representatives from Gallimard about acquiring translation rights for the book, he was asked why he did not simply want to reprint the Bray translation. His response was that he felt it lacked an insider's knowledge of Quebec's everyday lexicon and speech patterns.

"There's no way to replicate the original text completely; you have to make some very awkward decisions along the way," Nasrallah says.



▲ Dimitri Nasrallah

"Bray didn't have that intimacy with the Québécois language at all."

Enter Stratford, whom Nasrallah first encountered in 2016, when his own novel, *Niko*, was



▲ Madeleine Stratford

being translated into French by Quebec's Éditions la Peuplade; Stratford was simultaneously working on a translation of Marianne Apostolides's novel *Swim* for the same publisher. "I read her work at that time," says Nasrallah. "I knew she could translate in both directions. I heard her read and she had such a drama and theatricality to her approach to language, the depth of her vocabulary. [*Swallowed*] requires someone who wasn't going to be pedantic about it but who could be equally acrobatic."

Stratford already had a familiarity with Ducharme's book, having advised the German translator on a 2011 edition, for which she ended up writing the preface. At the time, however, the process of rendering Ducharme into another language was so challenging that Stratford admits to being frankly stymied in places.

"This is not Québécois French. This is Ducharme," Stratford says of her attempt to grapple with the idiosyncratic syntax. "I can't explain some of these expressions."

After struggling for more than a year to wrestle the text into English, Stratford's attitude has changed definitively. "Having translated the book into English, I can confidently say that I understand this book. I understand every single word of this book."

This is no mean feat, as anyone familiar with Ducharme's dense, elliptical, and layered text can attest. Unlike a traditional coming-of-age tale, which depends on a trajectory of learning or discovery, *Swallowed* goes in the opposite direction, following its central character into a

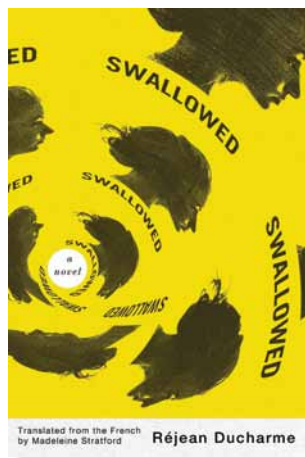
downward spiral of rage, despair, and madness. At the same time, it addresses issues of religion, family, and culture that were bubbling under the surface of 1960s Quebec on the cusp of the Quiet Revolution. That said, Nasrallah is quick

"There's no way to replicate the original text completely; you have to make some very awkward decisions along the way."

—Dimitri Nasrallah

to warn against drawing any one-to-one comparisons between the novel and Quebec society at the time of its composition. "This is out of left field in so many ways," says Nasrallah. "It still feels that way. It really gets under your skin."

Stratford, who compares her work as a translator to that of a mechanic taking apart a motor to examine its inner workings before reassembling it, readily agrees about the book's affective aspect. "I've never felt like this about any book before," Stratford says. "This isn't my



first translation, but I've never felt this personally, emotionally involved in a book."

Though Ducharme died in 2017 and the translation of his novel has been long out of print, Nasrallah hopes that English-language readers in 2020 will feel equally invested. In any case, the restoration of the book in English for a Canadian audience redresses what the publisher feels to be a significant cultural omission. "This is a book that would be on par with Atwood's early books or Richler's early books," Nasrallah says. "It belongs in the canon and it should be there for those who want to read it."

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BESTSELLERS

The right person to tell the story

Director Michelle Latimer calls for Indigenous talent to helm adaptations of Indigenous bestsellers **BY RYAN PORTER**

THIS FALL, director Michelle Latimer is unveiling adaptations of two perennial Canadian bestsellers, both by Indigenous authors. *Trickster* brings Eden Robinson’s supernatural coming-of-age series to CBC Television with a six-episode first season. *Inconvenient Indian* is an artful documentary inspired by Thomas King’s Indigenous-focused critique of U.S. and Canadian history (*The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America*). Both will premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival with *Trickster* airing on CBC Oct. 7.

The books have proven consistent juggernauts at independent bookstores: Robinson’s *Son of a Trickster* has been on Bookmanager’s Paperback Fiction chart for 22 weeks while King’s *The*

Inconvenient Indian has been on Bookmanager’s Canadiana chart for an astounding 320 weeks. Latimer – a Métis/Algonquin writer, director, and actor – reflects on adapting work by Canadian literary heroes and bringing Indigenous voices to film and television.

Did you initially seek out TV rights for the *Trickster* series?

I did. There were multiple other companies also fishing around for the rights. I couldn’t afford the rights on my own and I was lamenting how Indigenous artists can’t afford the rights to books in their own communities. I paired with Sienna Films and we went in on the rights together.

We put a proposal together that Eden really liked, and she liked it because of the Indigenous

participation. We had Indigenous writers and Indigenous creatives and Indigenous producers. The other companies didn’t have that.

What has your interaction with the authors been like?

It’s been interesting to see the authors say, “I wrote the book; you make the movie. I’m here to support you and I’m here for you to bounce ideas off of if you need me, but I am also fully happy for you to make this your own.” That kind of room was really important in creating both of those projects.

Both books are already huge bestsellers. What audience would you like the projects to reach?

I personally never saw my community represented in television when I was younger. For *Trickster*, I wanted young people to see a contemporary representation. With Thomas’s book,



▲ Michelle Latimer

TOP 10: Paperback Fiction			
AUG. 2–8: Data based on reports from 224 independent Canadian bookstores, as collected by Bookmanager			
1	29 weeks	American Dirt Flatiron Books/Raincoast Books	JEANINE CUMMINS
2	25 weeks	Normal People Vintage Canada	SALLY ROONEY
3	22 weeks	Son of a Trickster Knopf Canada	EDEN ROBINSON
4	20 weeks	The Glass Hotel HarperCollins  MANDEL’S POST-APOCALYPTIC NOVEL <i>Station Eleven</i> continues to be a chilling read during the ongoing pandemic, ranking #5 on the Canadian Fiction chart. But her latest, a story of class divisions set against the backdrop of a New York City Ponzi scheme, has proven to be one of the bestselling Canadian novels to be published in 2020.	EMILY ST. JOHN MANDEL
5	43 weeks	Girl, Woman, Other Grove Atlantic/Publishers Group Canada	BERNARDINE EVARISTO
6	4 weeks	The Order HarperCollins	DANIEL SILVA
7	3 weeks	Hamnet and Judith Knopf Canada	MAGGIE O’FARRELL
8	30 weeks	Small Game Hunting at the Local Coward Gun Club House of Anansi Press	MEGAN GAIL COLES
9	4 weeks	The Guest List HarperCollins	LUCY FOLEY
10	44 weeks	Little Fires Everywhere Penguin Books	CELESTE NG

I wanted to celebrate what was happening in Indigenous culture right now that a lot of people are probably unaware of.

What does the success of these two books say to you?

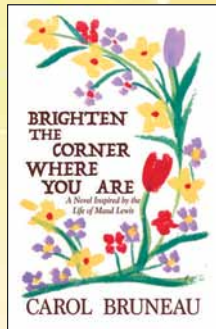
When I look at bestseller lists I am always struck by how many Indigenous authors are on them. We have been celebrating Indigenous authors for a long time. There are systemic reasons why that hasn’t happened on screen, but I do think it is starting to shift as we see more Indigenous creatives stepping behind the camera to tell these stories.

The cautionary tale, the “trickster” tale, is that as these stories prove profitable, that will attract people who maybe shouldn’t be telling these stories. When you love those Indigenous stories, go to those Indigenous production companies, go to those Indigenous writers and producers and directors to say, “How can we do this?” Because the biggest question that we have to ask ourselves is “Am I the right person to tell this story?”

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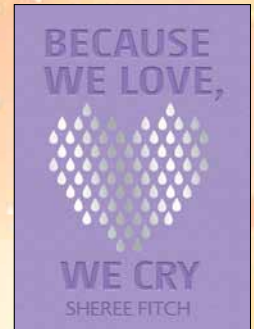
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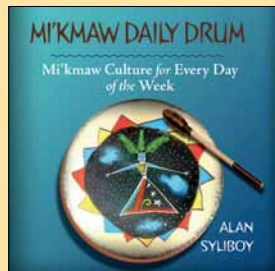
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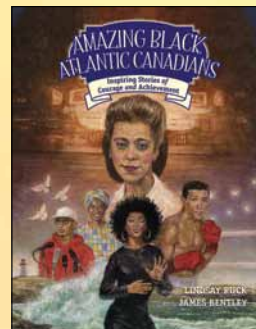
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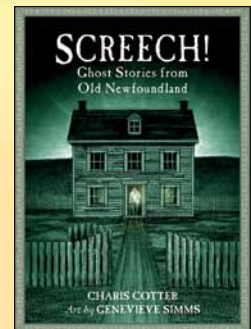
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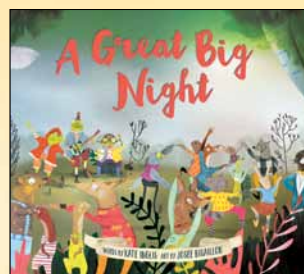
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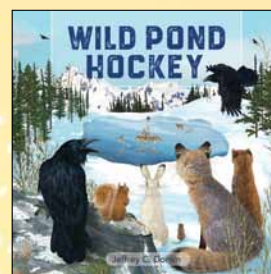
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The whole truth

Nurturing inclusion in publishing workspaces is a process that will take more effort than a social-media statement

BY SUE CARTER

MICHAEL BACH IS A BUSY GUY. As CEO and founder of the nationally run Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion for 15 years, he has worked with companies across many sectors helping them develop internal diversity and anti-racist policies.

But the centre's services have been in demand more than ever since May, after the Minneapolis police murder of George Floyd and the resulting surge of support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Although corporate response has been spotty, with many companies issuing watered-down messages of solidarity on social media, Bach believes that 20 years from now, we'll look back at this as a watershed moment.

"We're getting the 'We desperately need anti-racism training and we need it next week' calls," says Bach. "We're also hearing from organizations that traditionally have not been on the radar around diversity and inclusion."

Bach and his team of 35 consultants are currently booking into October. He also knows of independent diversity consultants whose schedules are full into 2021. CCDI has been blunt in turning down work with panicked organizations that want to, for example, take an eight-hour learning program and squeeze it into a 45-minute webinar.

"As we've said to many potential clients, racism took several hundred years to get to this fevered pitch. We can't solve it in a lunch-and-learn," says Bach. "What they don't understand is that it's the bigger picture – the concept of racism as a system as opposed to the individual acts. They're getting hung up on racism as an individual act, you know, calling someone a name or excluding someone, as opposed to the systems of racism that are really the barriers holding society back."

Many of these misconceptions are explored in Bach's new book, *Birds of All Feathers: Doing Diversity and Inclusion Right*, published in August

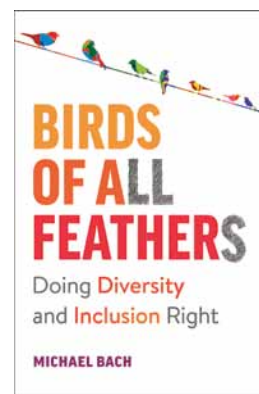


by Page Two Books. Written in a chatty, conversational tone, the book focuses on helping employers move beyond the buzzwords to develop more equitable workplaces. (As a white cis gay man, he avoids specific discussion of anti-racism and intersectional oppression, instead focusing on best workplace practices.) He suggests that the prevalent social-justice model – calling diversity initiatives “the right thing to do” – will not work because of a lack of incentives; instead he promotes a model that relies on business cases and numbers, focusing on creativity and innovation by leveraging diverse talents.

Through his experiences working on his own book and as a consultant in the past for several publishers, Bach has observed how the well-intentioned but risk-averse nature of the publishing industry has made it slow to fully adopt inclusive workforce policies. He believes it will take one major player to transition for the rest to follow suit. “I think everybody’s sitting around waiting for the first one to just

make the call,” he says.

In his book, Bach advocates for doing more than just ticking boxes: hiring more Black and Indigenous staff means nothing if they don’t feel welcome or if their talents are under-utilized. That is not to say numbers aren’t important. Data is vital to developing inclusive policies, both internal and external. He cites the recent example of Indigo Books & Music being called



out online to ensure that 15 per cent of the books on the retail chain's shelves are by Black authors.

"How do you know what the numbers should be if you don't have the numbers?" he asks. "If you are being asked to commit 15 per cent of your shelf space to Black authors, you then need to know how many Black authors you have. And if Indigo can't answer that question, if the distributors can't answer, and if the publishers can't answer it, you can't solve the problem."

Chelene Knight's Vancouver-based consulting company, Breathing Space Creative, doesn't focus on anti-racism training; she is still trying to grapple with her potential role in the complex process. What she has found helpful is working with publishing clients to improve issues around clear communication and expectations, especially when it comes to their authors.

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“Transparency in the industry has been a problem for so long, so small presses have an opportunity to change the way they communicate at the very start of that author-publisher relationship,” says Knight, who gives the personal example of a directorship position she was hired for without being informed of the organization’s rocky financial situation before signing the contract. “We talk a lot about inclusivity, but we need to be focused on how we roadmap success for folks versus blocking their way to it and a lot of this has to do with communication.”

Knight is currently re-envisioning the types of services Breathing Space will provide in the future to better support its clients, including how it handles sensitivity readings of unpublished manuscripts. “I find that these projects and discussions come up after a book has been acquired,” she says. “But it all comes down to who is at the table having these conversations in the first place.”

Bach recommends that publishers start the process by looking within. “If you have a client come into your bank – the same would be the case if you have an author who is Muslim or Black or Indigenous – you want to ensure they’re not going to face racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism in the process of engaging with you.”

AT TORONTO books and gift sales group Ampersand Inc., the momentum for change did in fact come from within. Several staff members – close to half of the company’s 14 employees identify as racialized – questioned management about its own policies and responsibilities around the Black Lives Matter movement and its record of inclusivity.

“It led to an opportunity to have this really open discussion with people who felt comfortable speaking to management,” says Tamara Mair, Ampersand’s operations manager. Those initial conversations led to a company-wide initiative where employees split up into four groups to brainstorm how the employer could become a better ally.

“This was a wake-up call that it’s our responsibility to do something,” says president Saffron Beckwith. “It started as a tough conversation that became amazing.”

“I personally have had a lot of uncomfortable conversations about BIPOC issues in my personal relationships, and a lot of the staff members have been doing a ton of work as well, just



▲ Tamara Mair

outside of Ampersand,” says Mair. “This was just one more uncomfortable conversation, but that’s how it all starts. And the more you talk about it, the less uncomfortable it becomes.”

The groups collectively came up with 40 ideas that were then whittled down to a voted-on shortlist. “It didn’t matter how tiny or crazy the ideas,” says Beckwith. “I think the things we came up with are tangible and manageable. We didn’t want them to be performative.”

Some of the action items – such as volunteering at an Indigenous organization for the company’s annual volunteer day and hiring

“This was just one more uncomfortable conversation, but that’s how it all starts. The more you talk about it, the less uncomfortable it becomes”

office-supply and catering companies owned by Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour – will have to wait until COVID-19 restrictions are eased. Other goals, such as creating more diverse book and gift lists, are actionable now.

Account manager Kris Hykel says that after Floyd’s murder, he was doing all he could on a personal level to make donations and spread awareness of the movement but realized he hadn’t been vocal at work and was grateful that some of his co-workers, like Mair, took the lead in this endeavour. He appreciates that the process wasn’t top-down and that it could ulti-

Ampersand’s preliminary list of goals

Seek out BIPOC-owned book and gift lines for representation.

Update company policies to be more specific about the company’s anti-racism strategy and ensure that it meets the latest Ministry of Labour employment standards.

Reconsider where job ads are posted and expand the employment search outside of the traditional publishing programs and publications.

Develop more diverse book and gift lists.

Create a code of ethics that is public-facing on the company’s website and contracts.

Include accessibility information on job/internship postings (i.e., on the second floor, there is an elevator).

Feature spotlights on BIPOC authors on Instagram once a month.

Volunteer for an Indigenous organization for Ampersand’s Annual Volunteer Day.

Use BIPOC-owned restaurants for catering lunches and staff dinners.

Work on stopping unpaid internships in the industry.

Source BIPOC-owned businesses for any office/business-related needs.

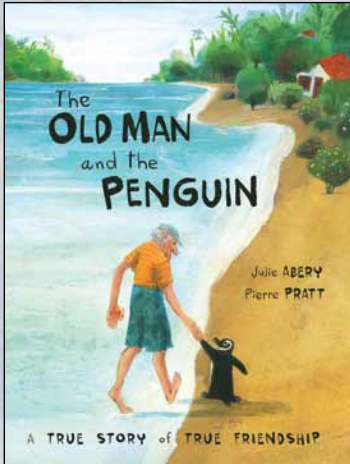
mately have some impact on businesses outside of publishing. “I think it’s really cool to have a grassroots policy that we created, instead of a more generic corporate one,” he says.

Moving forward, Mair, whose role was to connect people and keep the process running smoothly, will ensure the program moves forward in a sustainable way, and the goals will be revisited as a group when necessary.

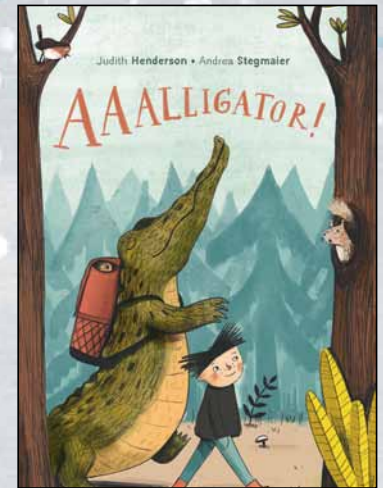
“In the end, I just wanted to know that my company is my ally. It is a conversation that has been difficult, but also it’s nice to see the eagerness and openness from everybody,” says Mair. “And it’s just important to me to see that the conversation isn’t going to die and that there is something of substance that is happening now. I think it’s a very good first step.” **Q**

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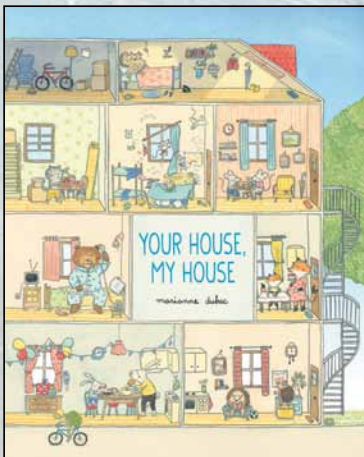
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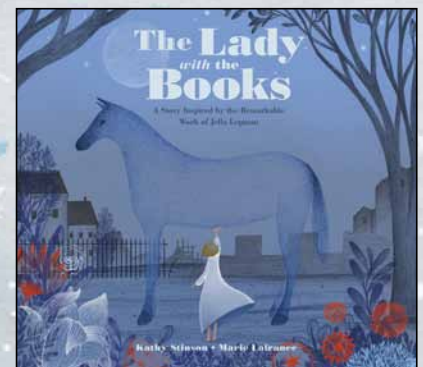
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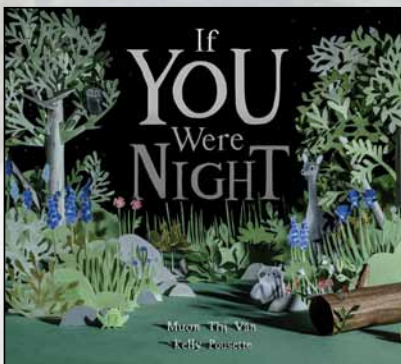
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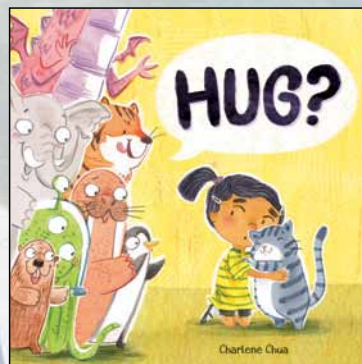
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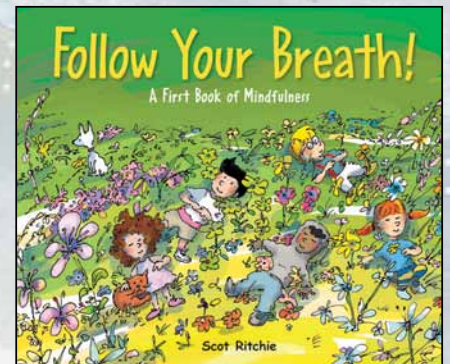
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KIDLIT PROFILE

Father figure

While working through anxiety, David A. Robertson
parents five kids, writes children's books, and pens
a moving tribute to his own father

BY RYAN PORTER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KC ADAMS

DAVID A. ROBERTSON HAS THE HOUSE TO HIMSELF. It's a rarity for the 43-year-old father of five. His wife, Jill, has taken the family – Emily, 17; Cole, 15; Anna, 12; Lauren, 10; and James, 5 – to the beach, and Robertson has been using the time to work, his usual soundtrack of alternative rock on rotation in the background. (This week it has been the unlikely alt-rock crowd-pleaser *folklore* by Taylor Swift.)

There isn't a lot of time for long writerly jags in the Robertson household – he relies on Jill to update the family Google calendar, which allows him to carve out time to work on his competing book projects without sacrificing family activities. “She’s scheduled my writing time, my research time, the kids learning time, everything,” he says by phone from his home in Winnipeg.

Whatever they're doing, it's working. Since *Stone*, the first graphic novel in Robertson's 7 Generations series, was released 10 years ago, he's published 20 graphic novels, a YA trilogy, the adult novel *The Evolution of Alice*, and the picture book *When We Were Alone*, illustrated by Julie Flett, which won the 2017 Governor General's Literary Award for Young People's Literature – Illustrated Books.

This fall is crowded even by Robertson's standards, with three books set for publication: *The Barren Grounds*, the first instalment in his new middle-grade trilogy *The Misewa Saga* (Puffin Canada); *Black Water*, a memoir about his relationship with his father and reclaiming his Cree heritage (HarperCollins); and *Breakdown*, the first graphic novel in *The Reckoner Rises* series, a sequel to his *Reckoner* YA trilogy (HighWater Press).

The fantasy epic *The Barren Grounds* pays winking homage to Narnia, as two artistically gifted Indigenous foster kids, Morgan and Eli, travel through a portal to the ravaged village of Misewa, which has been robbed of resources by human greed. They join Ocheq, an anthropomorphic fisher (a weasel-like creature with thick fur and a long snout), and Arik, an ebullient human-sized squirrel, as the new allies set forth on a quest.

Robertson refreshes these fantasy tropes by incorporating the legends and storytelling traditions of his Cree heritage. Environmental sustainability is pitted against empire building, heroes are honoured with

constellations in the sky, and it all ends with a high-speed canoe chase.

The first third of the book is dedicated to developing Morgan and Eli's experiences as new arrivals at the Winnipeg home of a foster family – an unusual amount of character-building for a middle-grade novel. It was worth it for Robertson, who points out that there are more Indigenous children in foster care today than ever attended residential schools.

Robertson had originally conceived of the novel as a book for adults. “I had a different experience set out for Morgan that was really too difficult for kids to read,” he says. “I wanted to find a way to talk about the foster care system in a way that wasn't traumatizing for anybody.”

It's characteristic of how Robertson writes for younger readers: he considers the age appropriateness of the subject matter before the complexity of the writing. “I didn't want to write down to children because I've met enough to know that they get it and that they're ready for work like this,” he says.

In the *Reckoner* trilogy, the protagonist is a teen Cree superhero grappling with an anxiety disorder; the second book, in particular, devotes significant attention to the character's mental-health crisis. “At almost every school I read that book at,” says Robertson, “I had at least one kid come up to me who had never talked about their mental health before and say, ‘I'm going through that.’”

Before group therapy, Robertson himself felt like his anxiety disorder was uniquely isolating. “You feel like there's no one else who could possibly understand what's going on in your mind and your body,” he says. “It's such a lonely feeling. But when you start to talk about it, you realize that other people feel that way. I think it's very important to be able to make people realize that they're not alone. Probably the most important decision I've made in my career was to say I can't hide the stuff that I'm going through anymore.”

He recalls sitting with Jill in the parking lot outside of Winnipeg bookstore McNally Robinson in fall 2010, before the launch party for one of the graphic novels in his 7 Generations series. That summer, he had experienced a nervous breakdown. He writes in *Black Water*, “There were

so many changes in such a short span of time, and my body, my mind, gave out.”

It was one of his first launches, and he couldn’t do it. “I can’t even stand up,” he told Jill. “My knees are going to give out. I’m going to die halfway through this [event].”

“If you feed this anxiety, it’s just going to get worse,” she said. “You have to do things that your anxiety is telling you that you can’t do.”

Somehow Robertson pushed through, setting a precedent that has kept him taking steps forward no matter how much his anxiety tries to yank him back. “Early in my career, people wouldn’t know how hard it was for me, how bad my mental health was,” he says. “I put on a face, and I went out and did my public speaking and I did my launches and I did my readings and I did classroom visits – oftentimes feeling that I was going to fall over during them.”

Today, Robertson is on medication but continues to experience bouts of anxiety. “Sometimes I’ll be in such a bad place that maybe I can’t [work as clearly] as I need to. But I can always edit it and fix it after,” he says. “I can honestly say that I don’t think it’s stopped me from doing anything.”

BLACK WATER is structured around a trip Robertson took with his father, Donald, to the eponymous northern Manitoba trapline – a tract of land used for hunting – that the latter grew up on. In the memoir, Donald is described as having a reputation for radiating a steady peacefulness. Robertson writes that *The Marrow Thieves* author Cherie Dimaline wanted to sit near his dad when Robertson brought him to the 2017 Governor General’s Literary Awards, because “there was a calmness to him that she felt drawn to.” Illustrator Julie Flett also remembers sticking close to Donald that evening. “I fell in love with them,” she says of Robertson’s parents. “I missed my family and they made me feel at home. Knowing that they were there in the audience to hear our acceptance speeches, David’s dad listening for my Cree pronunciation, encouraging us, meant the world.”

When Robertson was three, his father became superintendent of the Manitoba Indian Education Board and the family moved to Winnipeg. But the demands of the job kept Donald away from home, creating a division in Robertson’s parents’ marriage that proved insurmountable. After they separated, the young Robertson was left heartbroken by his

distant relationship with his father.

“He conveys so beautifully the absence of his father and then the reclaiming of that relationship,” says editor Jennifer Lambert. “That tenderness with which David writes about himself as a child, and that understanding he brings to that child, I found remarkable.”

This estrangement was complicated by his parents’ decision not to raise David and his older brothers, Cam and Mike, as Cree. (Their mother Bev is English, Irish, and Scottish.) As Robertson writes in *Black*

Water, his parents hoped “to keep us from the difficulties they thought we might face growing up in Winnipeg as First Nations kids.”

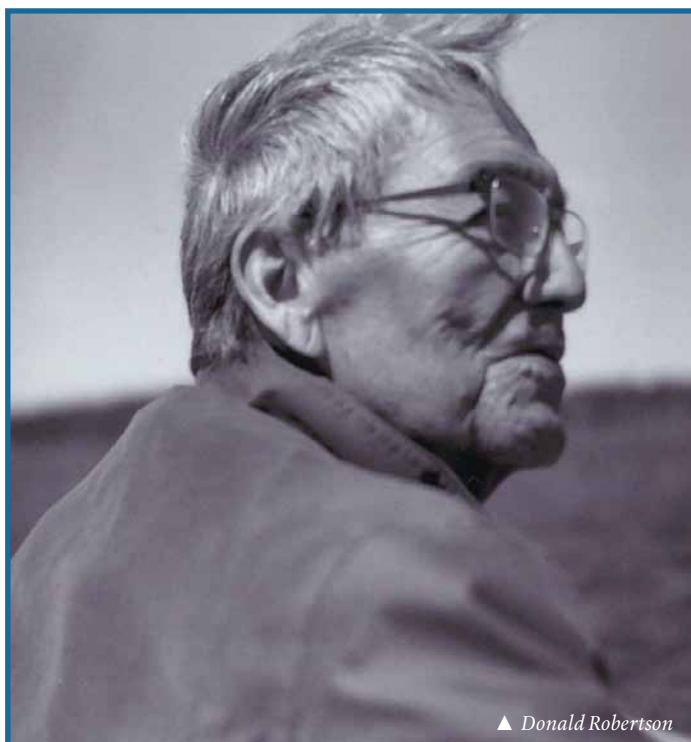
The book is the sum of a conscious effort to repair those severed cultural ties. Robertson also rebuilt the relationship with his father to the point where, in *Black Water*, he calls him his best friend. “The work that we did over the last 30 years brought us to the point where we felt we were ready to go to Black Water,” Robertson says.

On Dec. 27, as Robertson was revising the memoir, his father passed away at the age of 84. His death was sudden but peaceful, and it made *Black Water* at times painful to complete. “Nobody in my family has read it yet,” Robertson says. “I think it’s too hard for them. It’s been hard for me to read it.” He describes having to stop between chapters while recording the audiobook “to have a little breakdown.”

Robertson and Lambert considered different approaches to address the tragedy. They considered prefacing it early in the memoir, but Robertson ultimately decided to write a new epilogue to acknowledge his father’s passing.

“It’s not about his death, it’s about his life,” says Robertson. “It didn’t really change much in the story. But I think it changed what the story means to me. It’s a tribute now – a way to honour him. I’m sorry that he never got to read it, but I think he would have been proud of it.”

He hopes that as much as *Black Water* represents his own personal record of reconnecting with his Cree heritage, it can guide others as they navigate their own journeys of reconciliation. “My dad always used to say that our story isn’t a story of trauma,” says Robertson. “We have trauma in our history, in our lives, in our family. But really our story is a story of resiliency and a story of cultural reconnection and a story of love. I feel like that will help people understand what healing really means.” **Q**



▲ Donald Robertson

“Our story is a story of resiliency and a story of cultural reconnection and a story of love”

OPINION

Dear Industry...

Understanding the emotional burdens of writing while Black **BY SARAH RAUGHLEY**

Dear Industry,

This one goes out to children's publishing. Or perhaps I should say, this one goes out to white people. No, I am not an "angry Black girl." Oftentimes, when Black people point out oppressive power structures, we are dismissed as such. I am a Black children's author, and I believe the industry needs to better understand how hard it is to be a Black children's author. Most importantly, the industry needs to understand how often its underlying inequalities contribute to the emotional burdens of being one.

The burden of white consumption

I will never forget a rejection I received on the first manuscript I submitted to publishers. It was a contemporary fantasy starring a Nigerian-American teen going on an epic adventure. The letter was clear: my story was not Nigerian enough. The main character was not Nigerian enough. The fantasy wasn't African enough. Basically, the letter asked in a not-so-subtle way: "How can we make this book Blacker?"

Picture the person who likely wrote that rejection. The American children's publishing industry (and publishing in general) is notoriously white. Despite campaigns like #WeNeedDiverseBooks and #OwnVoices being propelled by children's authors, and despite publishers promising to make changes, a 2019 diversity survey conducted by Lee & Low Books revealed that the American publishing industry is overall 76 per cent white, 74 per cent cis women, 81 per cent straight, and 89 per cent non-disabled.

For the record, the Canadian side of publishing is just as white. Our country has largely failed to maintain a commitment to documenting race-based statistics in publishing, but there are facts that we can glean from the few surveys that have been conducted. For example, a recent survey in the *Toronto Star* reveals that 90 per cent of the characters in Canadian children's books published in 2018 were white. A 2018 salary survey conducted by Q&Q shows that fewer than 13 per cent of the 345 Canadian publishing professionals who took part in the study were non-white.

Looking at these figures, it is reasonable to assume that the gatekeepers – editors, agents, reviewers, and publishers – telling Black authors that our work needs to be "Blacker" are white.



Sarah Roughley ▲

Meanwhile, Black Canadian authors like myself are fighting just to have our work published in the first place. Author Nadia L. Hohn said it best: "As small as [the] American statistics may seem, the numbers in Canada are much more concerning, and I feel like it cannot only be attributed to our smaller population." As she notes, there are too few Black authors and fewer Black Canadian authors, many of whom are under-promoted and left out of event opportunities despite the number of young readers hungry for our stories. It's clear that there are several mountains to climb before real progressive change can happen.

What does "Blacker" mean to white people? Does it mean police brutality and pain? Does it mean African gods, like the ever-popular and much-used Yoruba Orishas? Does it mean Wakanda Forever? I genuinely don't know. That Black authors have to figure this out in order to be published reflects the problematic power dynamics within the industry. Even when publishing purports to support progressiveness, a privileged group is still controlling and limiting our voices. They are still putting us through the emotional turmoil of figuring out how to please a white consumer base and adhere to their fantasies of Blackness. Publishing a book that does not meet white mainstream desires can lead to shaming and accusations of inauthenticity.

Is this real life? Is this just fantasy?

The thing is, Black people are not the same. I can't say this loudly enough. We exist through-

out the diaspora inflected differently by culture, religion, geography, gender, class, sexuality, political ideology, and so on. We share similar histories and struggles, but we do not all have the same experiences. We do not all want to write the same kinds of stories. It is presumptuous to believe otherwise.

As a fantasy writer, may I add that it is presumptuous to assume that an African or African diasporic fantasy author wants to write a story based on their culture. Of course, many do. It's an exciting opportunity to challenge Eurocentric settings. But what about those who don't?

Not all African and African diasporic writers have a strong connection to their culture. I can't tell you how many people assume that we all must be an expert on all African folklore. For some, their culture may be too close or too real for them to access without considerable emotional labour. Being told that their very real culture is a fantasy setting for white enjoyment can be a terrible and confusing blow.

As a Nigerian-Canadian writer who grew up in Ontario, I've often felt, paradoxically, both too far and too close at the same time. Unfortunately, such affective entanglements can't be so neatly navigated. At the same time, there have been instances where others have tried to force me into the role of native informant despite it all. It is a problematic position to be put into.

Conclusion: I'm tired

It's exhausting for marginalized authors to meet the expectations of a non-marginalized publishing industry, fearing that if we don't do so, we won't make the sale, our work won't be adequately marketed, and our peers may not accept us. The #PublishingPaidMe hashtag on Twitter, started by author L.L. McKinney, revealed how little Black authors get paid and marketed in relation to our white peers.

Last year, in American children's publishing, less than half the books featuring Black characters were written by Black authors. This just rubs salt in the wounds of those already struggling to free themselves from the industry's complex web of power, expectation, and burden pervading the industry. Black authors should be the ones to decide what kind of stories we want to write and be true to our voices without fear of retribution. And we should be equally compensated for our work.

Let's end the mind games.

Sarah Roughley is author of the YA fantasy trilogy, The Effigies Series, and the upcoming 2021 series, The Bones of Ruin. And hey, she has a Ph.D in English too.

ILLUSTRATION

Pride portraits

Dylan Glynn on his fashion-inspired illustrations of drag heroes and important events in LGBTQ2S+ history **BY SHANDA DEZIEL**

ONE OF THE MORE eye-catching titles of the season is *Be Amazing: A History of Pride* (published in July by Farrar, Straus and Giroux BYR). In the non-fiction picture book, 13-year-old New Yorker Desmond Napoles tells their story of becoming a drag performer, fashion model, and activist – while also recounting important events and highlighting prominent figures in LGBTQ2S+ history. Providing the bright and dazzling artwork is Toronto's Dylan Glynn, a new-on-the-scene kidlit author and

illustrator. “I really appreciated how Desmond is narrating this book, and their stories are interspersed between [larger] lessons from LGBTQ+ history,” says Glynn. “That was the right move because, at the end of the day, Desmond is part of a legacy that originated so much from trans people of colour, from Black trans people. This [format] acknowledges that in a thorough and thoughtful way.” We asked Glynn to talk about his two favourite illustrations from the book.



► “I was thinking a lot about fashion illustration from the get-go, the expressiveness of the immediate lines and the loose ink washes – and I felt like that style went well with drag. When you see photos of Marsha P. Johnson you consistently get a sense of this radiant smile she had. I was really excited and felt it was an honour to do this portrait of her. And I’m just really happy with the likeness and the expression that I captured – if I can say that – and the smile in her eyes.”



◀ “This [Stonewall] illustration is my favourite from the book. I often think of Picasso’s *Guernica* when I do these multi-figural tragic compositions because it just has so much emotion, so much movement, and a sense of despair. I was really glad that the publisher didn’t revise this drawing at all, didn’t make it softer for kids or say something like, ‘But you know, some police are nice.’ And of course, this image [which depicts a scene from 50 years ago] is still so relevant today, it’s exactly like what is on our TV screens.”

▲ *The Old Woman*

PICTURE BOOK

Kindred spirits

A new story from illustrator Nahid Kazemi and author Joanne Schwartz is about an old woman who is definitely not a grandmother **BY SHANDA DEZIEL**

NAHID KAZEMI MOVED TO Montreal from Iran almost six years ago. In her home country, she was already an accomplished children's book author and illustrator, but in Canada she didn't know anyone in the publishing industry. "I started here from scratch," says Kazemi. "I used to go to the library in Montreal every day to read [kids'] books to figure out what is literature in Canada. I was looking for the best books and the ones closest to my style."

One day she came across *Sidewalk Flowers* by poet JonArno Lawson and illustrator Sydney Smith. "It was a wordless book but there was a name of an author on it," she says. "That gave me hope that there is a way for a person who is not native English to tell stories in this country."

Kazemi reached out to Groundwood Books, the publisher of *Sidewalk Flowers*, and messaged

Lawson on Facebook. She sent them her CV, books, and link to her website. That resulted in Groundwood publishing Kazemi's 2018 picture book, *I'm Glad That You're Happy* – about a relationship between two potted plants – and Lawson and Kazemi collaborating on 2019's philosophical picture book, *Over the Rooftops, Under the Moon*, published by Enchanted Lion Publishers.

When Kazemi came across Joanne Schwartz's *Town Is by the Sea*, also illustrated by Smith, she called the author out of the blue. "I thought it was an amazing thing that she just phoned me," says Schwartz. "I started looking at her work and realized this is a fantastic illustrator calling me. We both got very excited at the prospect of working together."

When Groundwood was looking for an il-

lustrator for Schwartz's next book, *The Old Woman* (released in September), the author suggested Kazemi: "I thought Nahid's style would bring a beautiful aura to my story."

Groundwood was happy to work with Kazemi again. And considering the unconventional nature of the project – a quiet children's book with no kids in it – the like-minded collaborative partnership would be a boon. "I wanted to write about an old woman who wasn't a grandmother and didn't have many people left in her life; yet, she is not lonely as she has her treasured companion by her side," says Schwartz. "The world has narrowed to this quiet space where she and her dog simply relish each day as it comes."

In this tranquil narrative, the woman walks in nature with her dog, takes naps, has tea – in fact, one of Kazemi's chalk-pastel double-page illustrations features just a kettle on a stove. "I knew that this story is a bit unusual with no kids and nothing happening, but I felt deeply that it's a story with a few layers," says Kazemi. "It is about the power of universal things: walking, playing with a dog, being in nature, enjoying the sunrise and the sunset, the crunch of dry leaves under foot, noticing the wind through the trees. This is a calming story to make us think about the end of our lives, and that is not usually what you find in a children's book."

Both publisher and author give Kazemi credit for making it the kind of book that will draw kids in. "She captured the beautiful relationship between the woman and the dog – there is this symbiotic kind of body language they have that feels reflective of real life," says House of Anansi publisher Semareh Al-Hillal, who oversaw the title. "Nahid also created an incredibly peaceful-feeling world. The woman in the illustrations feels the breeze and the sunlight, observes the sunrise and is ready for whatever day brings. There's this openness and this being in the present – and it strikes me that kids are the same way."

Kazemi, who used a muted palette highlighted with a gorgeous rosy-peach wash, says she wanted to tap into the spiritual side of the book while also paying attention to the small things. "I knew every aspect of the story mattered and should be depicted," she says. "I wanted all the details to reflect the woman's personality: the detailing of her scarf, her pillow, her blanket, her curtain pattern, her cup of coffee, her kettle, her bed, her sofa, her lamp, her picture on the wall, even what the natural world around her looks like. They should all be symbols of her inner universe, her inner peace."



▲ Sam Maggs

Q&A

Writing with a vengeance

From a manga adaptation of a classic YA novel to a prose version of a Marvel comic, Sam Maggs is working outside the box **BY SHANDA DEZIEL**

"I NEED A NAP," says Sam Maggs, during our phone interview from her home office in Los Angeles. The perpetually upbeat Canadian expat is exhausted; she's had six books released this past year, as well as fitting in video-game and comic-book writing, and a number of comic convention appearances. In July, Disney/Marvel published *The Unstoppable Wasp: Built on Hope*, Maggs's YA prose novel about the teenage Avenger, who shrinks down to the size of a bug when called upon to save the world. And in October, Simon & Schuster will release the first volume of Maggs's four-part manga adaptation of Rainbow Rowell's beloved 2013 YA novel, *Fangirl*, about university-bound twin sisters who are obsessed with a Harry Potter-like book series. Q&Q spoke with Maggs about multitasking, manga, female pirates, and what it means to write for Marvel canon.

In *Unstoppable Wasp*, the superhero's alter ego, Nadia Van Dyne, seems to have as much on the go as you do. [She's running a STEM lab, connecting with a new family, and learning to drive, on top of her Avengers duties]. Do you share her time-management issues? Nadia is struggling with life as a new immigrant to the U.S., new superhero, new stepdaughter, and new lab leader. She wants to be the best

scientist, superhero, stepdaughter, friend, and driver – and she can't be all those things obviously. It's true, I struggle with wanting to do everything all the time as best I can. But I really think this is an issue for teenagers; we put so much pressure on them to get good grades, do a million extracurriculars, charity work, and still have a social life – and it's essentially impossible.

How does a YA novel writer fit into the Disney/Marvel behemoth?

I'm not important at all. I feel very lucky to work on everything from Captain Marvel to Spider-Man to *WASP*. But you're not gonna see me at an Avengers movie premiere. That's okay, I'm happy in my writer bubble. That said, the books do exist in the same continuity as the comics [and the films]. So the things I wrote in the book are still official in Marvel canon, and that's where I feel I had a little bit of influence.

How do you make a Marvel character or a Rainbow Rowell character your own?

People ask me all the time if [that kind of source material] is limiting. But I love it. There's nothing more intimidating to me than sitting down and staring at a blank page knowing that I could write anything about absolutely anyone. That's paralyzing. It's why I think fan fiction is such a valuable tool for writers because it gets a lot of

the stuff that can really trip you up out of the way, like world-building or character backstory. There are certain things that are always true: Nadia is always an optimist, Peter Parker is always a smart-ass. Within that you get to decide what story about a character has not been told yet, what lesson have they not learned yet.

What experience did you already have with manga and with Rowell's *Fangirl* before taking on the adaptation?

I love that book. I think it speaks to the [fan fiction] experience so well. As for manga, I grew up reading the original *Sailor Moon* and *Fruits Basket*. But I had never written a manga before, and it's a very different medium than a traditional Western graphic novel. So when I got the project, the people at Viz Media sent me a ton of shoujo manga to immerse myself in the medium. Nobody was born knowing how to write graphic novels or manga or whatever. But with mentorship and practice anyone can learn.

What should fans of the book know about the manga adaptation?

Rainbow provided notes on the first draft to make sure that we were going in the right direction, and she also wrote some new scenes with [the novel's fan-fiction characters] Simon and Baz. This one novel has been adapted into four graphic-novel volumes, so we spend a lot of time with every scene from the book, and you get more time with the characters. The art is really given a chance to breathe.

You've got more books set to come out in 2021, including *Tell No Tales*, a graphic novel based on the adventures of early 18th-century female pirates. What drew you to that topic?

In the golden age of piracy, they were very egalitarian and democratic – they accepted people of colour, escaped slaves, women, Native Americans. They elected their captains, split their shares democratically. The governments and world religions of the time didn't like this about them and organized a smear campaign, but to the people they were folk heroes, very Robin Hood-esque. [Illustrator] Kendra Wells and I tried to imagine the kinds of adventures all women and non-binary pirate crews might have during that time.

Your books often feature all-women teams, squads, crews, and rarely feature heterosexual relationships.

I always think about that Ruth Bader Ginsburg quote. Someone asked her, "How many women will be enough on the Supreme Court?" and she says, "When there are nine." My books really don't have a lot of dudes in them, and I'm not sorry about it.

ENGAGE YOUNG READERS

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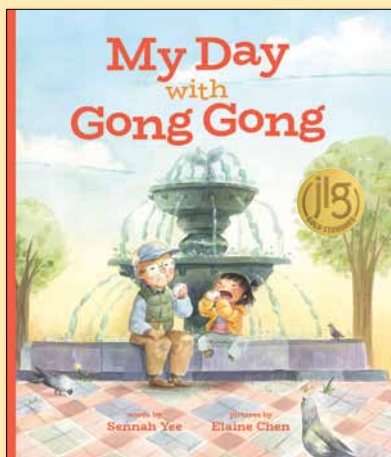
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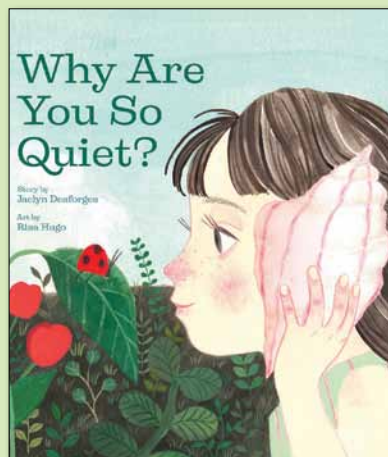
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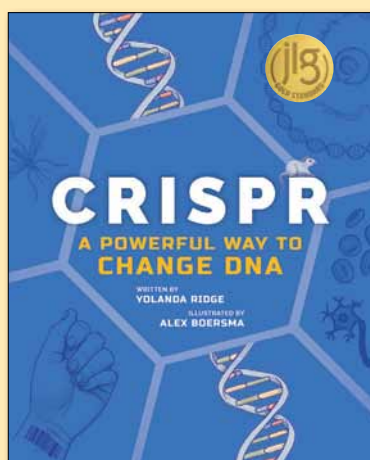
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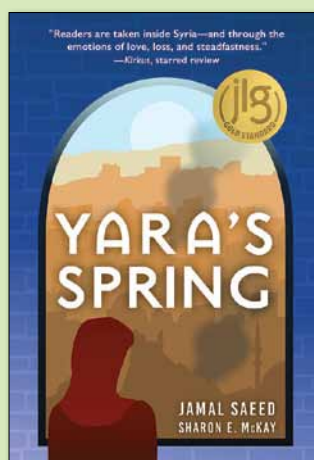
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Look! Up in the sky!

Two new books address costumed superheroes, both fictional and real

PAGE 34

Reviews



▲ Ronald J. Deibert

TECHNOLOGY

Rebooting our lives

Ronald J. Deibert's 2020 Massey Lectures argue that we must rethink our relationship to the internet **BY NAVNEET ALANG**

Reset: Reclaiming the Internet for Civil Society

Ronald J. Deibert

House of Anansi Press

TRYING TO DETERMINE a through line of broad historical periods is at best a fraught endeavour. But if there is a single driving idea of the 20th and 21st centuries, it might well be simply “more.” The movement toward more seems to define everything from the eventual global domination of liberal capitalism to the post-1968 liberation of libidinal desire. More is better.

Few arenas seem to exemplify this lust for ever-expanding growth better than the web. The rise of the internet has been defined by more: more choice, more information, more freedom, but also more surveillance, more distraction, more heat and acrimony.

In his new book, political science professor Ronald J. Deibert suggests that the incessant push toward more online needs a simple but powerful countermeasure: restraint. The book is based on the 2020 CBC Massey Lectures and is structured into two major parts. The first – and much more expansive – is an outline of the

dizzying array of things that have gone wrong with the ubiquity of the digital in our lives. Second – and much shorter – is a suggestion for how we might fix things.

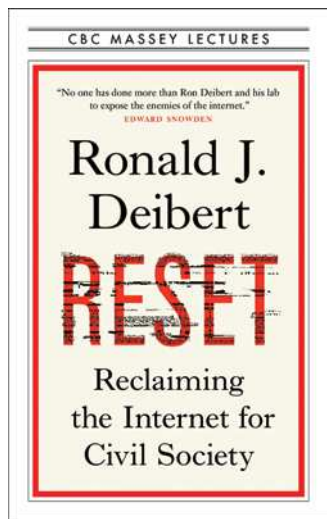
The first four chapters each tackle a specific aspect of our newly digital lives: the economics of social media, the interaction of technology and the structure of human psychology, the linkage of technology and authoritarian governance, and the environmental toll of everything from smartphones to Google searches.

Reading that first section is as illuminating as it is terrifying and leaves one feeling a bit shell-shocked. Deibert heads up the Citizen Lab, a University of Toronto–affiliated research centre that focuses on technology, security, and human rights. That perspective gives him a unique vantage point into the digital world, almost comparable to the head of an intelligence agency. In stark, lucid, and quite plain terms, Deibert outlines the way the stunning pace at which social media and smartphones have spread around the world has produced a kind of “digital exhaust” – reams of data that can be used to track individuals and prey on or predict their behaviour. Not only is our psychology and well-being affected by technology, our addiction to our devices is also monetized.

Drawing on the work of Shoshana Zuboff, who coined the term “surveillance capitalism,” Deibert points to both the deep financial incentives involved in tracking users online and also the way they can go awry. Pointing to our current moment of COVID-19 as a sort of accelerant, he argues “the devices, networks, and cloud computing systems on which nearly everyone is now forced to rely while in isolation were never built with complete security in mind, and they provide a gold mine of intelligence data for states and other nefarious actors.”

Among the most shocking examples of this is Deibert's description of the murder of exiled Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the manner in which anyone targeted by authoritarian

regimes can be tracked and apprehended – or worse – beyond what was once the safety of national borders. The regime of digital surveillance, Deibert convincingly argues, has been a boon for authoritarianism, from the tight control of Russia or China to the rightward shift in the U.S. to the illicit use of surveillance tech here in



Canada by the RCMP. As detailed in the book, Deibert's Citizen Lab itself has been the target of hackers and state actors alike, including an in-person spy-vs.-spy episode involving NSO, a notorious Israeli intelligence company made up of former Mossad members. It would read a bit like an espionage thriller were it not so real and genuinely scary.

For a book loaded with detail and technical explanation that delves into some deeply worrying territory, however, the text moves along at a steady clip, its roots as a lecture series making it approachable and lively even for those unfamiliar with technology.

Still, all told, it is an overwhelming and sometimes demoralizing read. As Deibert writes, "it's as if we have sleepwalked into a new machine-based civilization of our own making, and we are just now waking up to its unforeseen consequences and existential risks." It is that sense of inevitability that leads Deibert to land on the concept of restraint as the way to get to the titular reset so necessary for the digital world. Deibert puts forth the original definitions of both liberalism and republicanism as a necessary grounding ideology. Each, unlike the attitudes espoused by present-day Liberals in Canada or Republicans in the U.S., is focused on the rule of law and mechanisms of restraint. These include limitations such as regulating how tech companies operate (an exemplary move is that of WhatsApp putting up barriers to spreading

misinformation), breaking up tech companies or initiating similar antitrust moves, and developing a new role for the state in the digital infrastructure of life.

One wishes that perhaps less time had been spent on outlining the problems and more on delving into solutions, given that the former is now widely accepted and the latter so poorly understood. And the recourse to both liberalism and republicanism may not fully account for how and why digital capitalism seems to have so thoroughly co-opted those once noble ideals, or recognize that they may not in fact be worth saving.

All the same, *Reset* is a shocking call to action and a persuasively argued book. It is the sort of text one hopes will be read widely, and in particular taught in post-secondary courses. After all, a reset of the basic infrastructure of life will only come through a profound political reckoning – and like the foment of 1968, it may just be a reconceptualization of what we want and why we want it that finally drives change.

★ Commanding Hope: The Power We Have to Renew a World in Peril

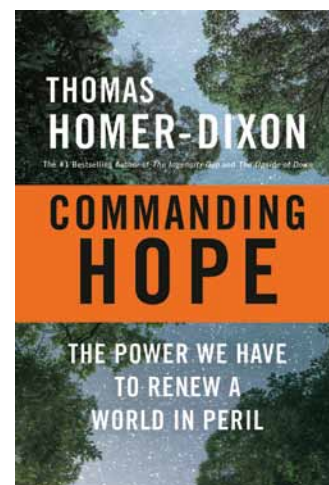
Thomas Homer-Dixon
Knopf Canada

"WE'RE DOOMED." Thomas Homer-Dixon, a university research chair in the faculty of environment at the University of Waterloo in Ontario and director of the Cascade Institute at Royal Roads University in Victoria, B.C., has been hearing these words from his students more often these days. Labelled a "doom-meister" himself, Homer-Dixon has spent 40 years studying our growing global challenges – economic insecurity, climate change, pandemics, scarcities of resources, incompetent governance, and barriers to innovation among them – and watching his downbeat analyses and predictions prove largely accurate. In his third book, he doesn't stop by defining our current problems and noting their causes. Instead, he provides a set of scientific tools to help us imagine a possible way through the apocalyptic mess we have created (the COVID-19 pandemic included).

Based in historical and scientific knowledge of how hope works, Homer-Dixon's book is a sober but invigorating look at where we stand, how we got here, and how we can get moving – beginning with the human mind. Imagination, Homer-Dixon posits, is key to solving our most pressing problems.

The prologue opens with the words of the author's four-year-old daughter, who has discovered a science article on her mother's desk and asks what it is about. The article is a 2012 piece from the journal *Nature* that posits a level of 50 per cent biodiversity loss before the remaining biosphere crashes. The article's 22 authors estimate that at our current rate of biodiversity reduction, the Earth will reach that point by 2045. A vividly rendered scene unfolds, grounding Homer-Dixon's book in precise and memorable detail. It also kicks off a story of a potentially positive future.

This prologue leads into an equally evocative scene set in 1957. A three-year-old girl plays with a toy phone at the feet of her mother, who is calling community leaders in an attempt to encourage them to circulate a petition to end atmospheric nuclear testing. The woman working the phone in her home began as an activist



by writing letters to the editor, then participated in the Connecticut Committee to Halt Nuclear Testing. The woman, who ultimately went on a hunger strike in service of her cause, was Stephanie May; the three-year-old girl is future leader of Canada's Green Party, Elizabeth May.

In addition to having the imagination to envisage a better world, Homer-Dixon argues that another challenge facing us is our inability to understand our own views, how and why they differ from those of others, and how they relate to institutions and technologies. Growing political polarization, related social disintegration, and what he calls "social earthquakes" are evident everywhere, but positive ways through them are hardly apparent at this point. The cognitive-affective mapping tool Homer-Dixon shares in his final chapters is intended to help us better understand ourselves, our adversaries, and the conflicts in which we are embroiled.



▲ Thomas Homer-Dixon

Homer-Dixon marshals a vast background in complexity science and also uses pop-culture touchstones such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Mad Max* to help his reader better grasp the workings of social power, death anxiety, the role of hero stories, and the impetus for immortality projects in our lives. His overall aim with this book is the development of strategic intelligence – a laudable pursuit, since Homer-Dixon demonstrates that never have we needed such intelligence more.

Brilliantly structured and utterly absorbing from beginning to end, *Commanding Hope* addresses with honesty and courage the dangers we face and offers us practical ways to prepare for the hard work ahead. –Brenda Schmidt

Restoring Democracy in an Age of Populists and Pestilence

Jonathan Manthorpe

Cormorant Books

BY NOW, EVERYBODY KNOWS that Francis Fukuyama got it wrong. When he declared, in his 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*, that the fall of the U.S.S.R. and the Berlin Wall

signalled the global triumph of liberal capitalism, he was at best overly optimistic. Even Fukuyama has been forced to walk back his thesis, notably in his 2018 volume *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, a book that Victoria journalist and foreign affairs expert Jonathan Manthorpe clearly has great admiration for.

To be fair, when Manthorpe invokes Fukuyama's end-of-history theory, he adds a suitably ironic coda. When he made his pronouncement (which originally appeared in a 1989 essay in *The National Interest*), Fukuyama suggested that the only things that might prevent the unbridled victory of Western liberal democracy were religion and nationalism, neither of which appeared particularly likely.

By 2020, we have sufficient distance – and hindsight – to recognize just how powerful religion and nationalism can be in promoting forces of illiberalism and authoritarianism. So powerful, in fact, that they have allowed Manthorpe to publish a book with a distinctly anti-Fukuyama title. The notion that democracy needs to be restored implies, of course, that it has been supplanted or seriously degraded, which, while arguably not yet quite true, is at least a foreseeable contingency in much of the Western world.

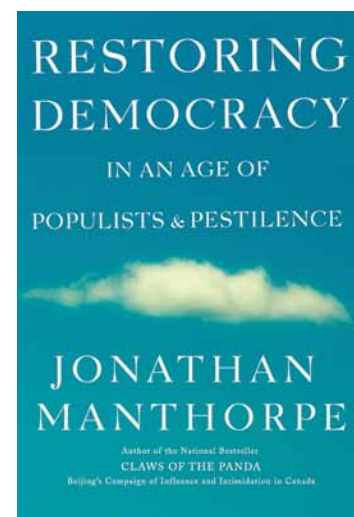
And Manthorpe is good at sketching out the various body blows democracy has suffered in various societies – the U.S., the U.K., Canada, and Europe – since the pivotal year of 1989. “This is going to be a fast gallop over heavy ground,” Manthorpe writes at the outset and, true to his word, in the span of about 300 pages, readers are treated to a recap of some of the most significant geopolitical shocks from the past two decades: the financial crisis of 2008–09; the rise of authoritarian governments in Hungary, Poland, and Russia (as well as China, whose economic ascension roughly coincided with its disavowal of Western liberal capitalism); the Brexit referendum in the U.K.; and the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency.

There is no doubt that Manthorpe's diagnosis of incipient crises in several supposed liberal democracies (not excluding Canada) is accurate, as are his ideas about what is causing this. Staggering and increasing income inequality in the Western world is one of the paramount villains in Manthorpe's view and he is especially good at detailing the resentments stoked by working classes around the globe after the crash of 2008 left millions homeless and jobless while big banks and billionaires were handed government bailouts and allowed to grow ever richer.

He is also unquestionably right about the

media's failure to accurately understand these resentments and the ways they led to discontent that manifested in Brexit and Trump. By chasing online clicks and advertising dollars, the media has stoked polarization and division in countries like the U.S. and Britain, while also creating a vacuum of reliable sources for information that has allowed bad actors like Breitbart, Fox News, and various internet trolls and disinformation sites to flourish.

Manthorpe provides a breathless flurry of data, but there is some evidence that the book was written at a similar white heat. Repetition abounds, especially in areas such as the explanation of U.K. prime minister Boris Johnson's



reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic (and his own subsequent hospitalization) and the rise of the gilets jaunes movement in France. Here, Manthorpe also appears a bit disingenuous, focusing on the legitimate concerns of the country's blue-collar workers while ignoring the co-option of the movement by various far-right racist and xenophobic groups for their own ends.

But the major flaw in the book is the absence of notes and bibliography. This is especially ironic in a book that spends some time critiquing the amount of misinformation that has been allowed to proliferate online and blaming a general lack of media rigour and consumer literacy for democracy's ill health. By offering a dense, fact-heavy book but no opportunity for a reader to independently consult or verify the author's sources, Manthorpe asks us to take a leap of faith his own analysis argues against. If he is correct – and he surely is – that democracy is under dire threat, it's essential that those defending it not leave themselves open to accusations of doing the very thing they are decrying. –Steven W. Beattie

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FICTION

Party time

In Marlowe Granados's debut novel, two young women in NYC live for experience and immediacy **BY STACEY MAY FOWLES**

Happy Hour

Marlowe Granados

Flying Books

ISA EPLEY WANTS TO LEARN as much as she can about the world. Sophisticated, adventurous, and somewhat weary, she sees things with a perspective fresher than most. Her meticulously kept diary is littered with thoughtful insights into the countless people she meets: “people who are tired of themselves are inexhaustibly curious” or “people use awkwardness as an excuse to be rude.” According to Isa, a typical New York conversation “would be two people waiting for their turn to talk.”

Isa's effervescent stream of observations make up the contents of *Happy Hour*, the debut novel from writer and filmmaker Marlowe Granados. The book is also the first offering from newly established Flying Books, a micro-publisher and partnership between industry veteran Martha Sharpe and former Coach House Books editor Emily Keeler.

Taking place over one sweltering lost summer in New York, *Happy Hour's* delightfully meandering May to September journey is recounted

by Isa at the “unserious age” of 21. Far from wide-eyed and naive, Isa arrives in New York with her best friend, Gala Novak, each without real plans but carrying suitcases full of glamorous outfits. While they lack conventional ambition, they are determined to enjoy themselves to the fullest: on day one the pair quite literally walk into a party. Piecing together a meagre income via random gigs like selling dresses, art modelling, and nightclub hostessing, Isa and Gala experience “legal ambiguity,” a suboptimal sublet, and a lack of vegetables in their diet while they pursue the next great experience.

This kind of set-up could easily devolve into a ham-fisted cautionary tale; *Happy Hour* thankfully refuses lazy cliché. Instead we are simply allowed to revel in the wonderfully directionless ride of Isa and Gala's good and occasionally bad times, soaking up the book's carefree tone with each invitation accepted and cocktail consumed. Exceptionally skilled at the good life, they happily hop from party to party and moment to moment, meeting a revolving door of big-city characters and judging them accordingly. Everyone seems to aggressively assert what they do, while our plucky – if somewhat jaded –

heroines are proud to announce that they are “doing absolutely nothing.” (Or, as Isa astutely observes, “It's funny how in a place where everything is an experience, people see such little value in just living.”)

With so many conversations and so many characters flitting in and out, it can be hard to discern who or what actually matters – which of course is the point. A run-in with a group of writers, editors, and critics is one particularly hilarious diversion, serving more as a scathing takedown of dominant literary culture than a simple random night at a dingy bar. (“I wonder how it would be to simply exist and feel my voice was necessary and vital without doing much work at all.”)

On the surface, *Happy Hour* is a deliciously fun fever dream conjured in one of the world's greatest cities. But it's also a witty critique of our pervasive cult of ambition. In a world where work so often defines and destroys us, Isa and Gala are admirable – if impossible – heroines. They value genuine experience over traditional striving, and are comfortable living with uncertainty and discomfort if it means they're free to go where the next invitation takes them. They are at the centre of the party yet always somehow just outside it, observing and assessing accordingly. It might be easy to dislike them if we weren't so charmed by their approach.

In a December 2019 interview with *Q&Q*, Keeler called *Happy Hour* “one of the most refreshing books about being a young woman I have ever read.” It's hard to argue: Isa is a protagonist of our time, simultaneously unimpressed with prestige and mesmerized by beauty, devoted to a life of pleasure-seeking in a way that is dismissive of the status quo and somehow never shallow.

You could label *Happy Hour* escapism, and no one would be faulted for reading this wonderful debut as frothy entertainment. But there is so much more here than empty exploits and lavish decadence. There is a hint of darkness that lingers in the corners, a soft whisper that this kind of pleasure is not sustainable, so one should find every opportunity and enjoy it while it lasts. “When we were younger, everything for the first time always felt the best, or at least the most,” our young narrator muses. “Sometimes getting older feels like striking the same chord and it sounding different.”

Under *Happy Hour's* glittering surface runs a witty tone of necessary critique, a fun hint of mockery, and the vital celebration of everyday joy. It is a book that wisely lives in the moment and encourages us to do the same.

★ The Company We Keep

Frances Itani

HarperCollins

IF NOTHING ELSE, Frances Itani's latest novel shows the utter importance of community. Such a message is ironically timely, given the current need for physical distancing during a global pandemic. But Itani's book is much more than this. The novel is so beautifully written and so full of wisdom that it's likely readers will want to return to it numerous times.

Death is what unites the characters in *The Company We Keep*. Brought together by a hand-printed notice on a grocery-store bulletin board, a small group of strangers meets in the back of Cassie's Café to talk about their grief. Cassie has given the space to her friend Hazzley, whose husband, Lew, died three years earlier. Itani introduces the characters in successive chapters, then brings them together at the first meeting, where they begin to reveal themselves.

Gwen's life has been sad: married to a bully, she is nagged into retiring from a job she loves. When her husband dies shortly after her retirement, Gwen finds herself alone, her grown-up sons having fled as soon as they could. To fill some time, Gwen takes on the task of caring for a parrot named Rico. As they slowly form a bond, Gwen ponders her marriage and the apparent loss of herself. Chiyo, a fitness instructor, has cared for her mother through months of dying and has mixed feelings about her parent. Tom, an antiques dealer and poet, mourns the loss of his wife. Addie, a health administrator, is grieving the loss of her best friend. And Hal-lam, a Syrian refugee, is rocked by the death of his wife and destruction of his home country.

Each character has a different experience and reaction to loss. Essentially, each character is trying, in his or her own way, to accomplish what Hazzley sees as her goal in emptying some of the rooms of her house: "[W]hat she was really trying to do was create a life – her life, the story of herself as she wanted to be right now." Itani deftly illustrates the varied complexity of human relationships; the loss of a spouse or mother or best friend changes a person and demands new ways of being or continuing in life.

Using a third-person narrator capable of assessing all the characters in the novel with clarity and precision, Itani weaves the lives of her cast together as they become friends and over time reveal painful secrets. Perhaps because they have all felt heartache, they are careful with the feelings of others. This may also result from the fact that they are a self-selected group,



suffering in similar situations and wishing to change them through words. Itani's characters are essentially decent and kind; they get frustrated with themselves and others, but a generosity of spirit and a gentle understanding infuse their interactions. They can cry and laugh together. They can find hope and even love.

The Company We Keep shows people at some of the lowest moments of their lives and understands how such times make connection with others profoundly meaningful. And in a brilliant move, there's no chat about closure.

–Candace Fertile

★ Daniil and Vanya

Marie-Hélène Larochelle;
Michelle Winters, trans.

Invisible Publishing

READING MARIE-HÉLÈNE LAROCHELLE'S debut novel is like watching a terrifying play. The sense of dread and horror is physically palpable, and the careful stagecraft of the writing – in Michelle Winters's capable English translation – is precisely calibrated. Readers will find themselves unable to look away, whether they like it or not.

The novel follows Emma and Gregory, an affluent creative-class Toronto couple set on adopting a child. An international agency prof-fers twin baby boys, Daniil and Vanya, from a St. Petersburg orphanage, and soon the Canadian couple is on a plane to Russia to retrieve the children. "We were going to have everything we wanted," Emma gushes when she hears the news. "We were ready to make every promise, to agree to everything required. We hastily signed the papers like we were at a party." On the flight back, the twins fall violently, screamingly ill and

a doctor grimly suggests they are suffering symptoms of alcohol poisoning.

Such doom-laden foreshadowing is direct and consistent enough that it ends up as a guiding soundtrack. The twins quickly grow to show violent, chilling absences of empathy and the fault lines of Emma and Gregory's marriage bubble rapidly to the surface. The tensions of the book play on how – not if – it's all going to hell.

The novel's second half alternates the twins' points of view with Emma's, who has the first half's perspective all to herself. It's an effective way to prevent the book from becoming one note: the twins' dual narration keeps them from becoming ciphers and expands the book's emotional horizon. Further, Larochelle skilfully imbues their points of view with as much humanity as their mother's. Thankfully, any clumsy attempts at making them "the real victims" is



avoided, while still preserving a level of three-dimensional ambiguity to their actions.

However, the novel is at its best when it sits with wilfully ignorant Emma. She wants to be a good mom (or, at least, that's what she thinks), and she has deeply convinced herself she loves her adopted children. Her refusal to see their more sinister qualities serves not just the plot's relentless drive toward crack-up but deeper questions of parenthood and filial love – dark questions that match the spectre of the book's violence. What are parents to do with children who are consistently cruel? What does it mean when parents are unable to understand their children? Are there bad reasons for becoming parents?

Larochelle traffics in few answers to those questions and, accordingly, the abrupt ending will not satisfy many readers, though perhaps this is the point. Regardless, the book is a remarkable achievement, and Larochelle is a writer to watch. –Casey Plett

★ **A History of My Brief Body**

Billy-Ray Belcourt

Hamish Hamilton

IN HIS HIGHLY ANTICIPATED MEMOIR, Billy-Ray Belcourt – the youngest winner of the Griffin Poetry Prize – proves yet again his astonishing linguistic precision and beauty. Reimagining the form and structure of a conventional memoir, Belcourt masterfully documents memories, encounters, reflections, and dreams in hybrid form, ranging from short paragraphs to lists to



▲ Billy-Ray Belcourt

longer expositions. Despite the stylistic variety, *A History of My Brief Body* displays a pervading lucidity, akin to dreaming while standing wide awake, feet firmly on the soil.

Belcourt's academic rigour remains intact even when describing his most personal encounters. He layers into the writing complexities of meaning so rich they sometimes require rereading, and he grounds his vulnerability with turns of phrase both jarring and jewelled: "Gender is what's heard when wind touches glass. Remember: by the time sound reaches the flesh, innumerable bursts of light have already shot through us."

Over the course of the book, the author delves deep into the well of loneliness, enjambling the personal with the political and harkening to their inextricable link. He recalls, in heartbreaking detail, the ways in which intimacy is denied and granted in his most euphoric and anxiety-riddled sexual encounters. He also explores the ways in which his humanity is denied, at one point recounting the words of a white woman who, unprovoked, begs him not to kill himself (at his book launch, no less). Elsewhere, he relates experiences dating white men who viewed him with artificial colour-blindness or exotic fetishization.

In contrast to these prejudiced or dehumanizing poses, Belcourt invites us to witness the fullness of his being, freed from the narrow eyes

of the White Gaze and conscious of the challenge in writing about his life without his identity becoming commodified: "To my mind, one of the most vital modalities of decolonial life is that of remaining unaddressable to a settler public that feasts on our misery. Most of the time, writing a book seems incompatible with this." One of the most refreshing elements of *A History of My Brief Body* is Belcourt's awareness of his purpose and place as a writer. He points the compass of his writing life in many directions of inquiry, from responding to the words of fellow authors and contemporaries to exploring his own choices.

The book is also a fascinating exploration of the impact of colonialism in all its ramifications: the ways it is encountered in the heart, body, and mind; the ways it infiltrates daily life and relationships; the ways in which it needs to be resisted; and the ways it persists as living history. At a time of public reckoning focused on increased awareness of police brutality, Belcourt reminds us that this is an ever-present reality for a racialized individual: "I have a phobia of the police. How could I trust he who disavowed personhood to instead be a gun? He who is bullets rather than an organism capable of nurturance?"

In the preface, Belcourt writes a letter to his kokum, stating, "I need to honour the intimacies of the unwritten." And how beautifully he does. –Sheniz Janmohamed

How to Lose Everything

Christa Couture

Douglas & McIntyre

CHRISTA COUTURE IS A singer-songwriter, author, and broadcaster. She is Cree and Scandinavian. She is a mother. She is disabled. She is, as she puts it, "every parent's worst nightmare." Couture's debut memoir details a life of extraordinary mental, emotional, and physical endurance: a leg amputation in early childhood, the successive deaths of two infant sons, a divorce, and what could have been career-ending thyroid cancer. Couture is living proof of how to lose almost everything and recover from it.

This is not a book in which you skip the prologue. Some may consider it a non-conventional disclaimer, but its purpose is to prepare readers for the loss of children – two sons are born; neither survives. The balance of the book combats society's desire to hide fear, pain, and trauma from view. By exposing her greatest

sources of grief, Couture shows that there is love and healing to be found in memory. The book doesn't shy away from the ugly parts of trauma:



Christa Couture ▲

the mindlessness, the selfishness, the tears, and snot. It embraces and cares for every part of it.

Couture's first chapter details her fantasies in childhood. Roaming the playgrounds and planning her dream wedding creates a light, often humorous tone that weaves through the memoir, despite the heavy subject matter. Her preteen years look a bit different than those of other kids, having already confronted cancer and near death.

Each of the book's 12 chapters offers a different story of hardship in which Couture is dismantled and reassembled, sometimes whole and often stronger, other times having been emptied out altogether. Some chapters are written chronologically, blow after blow, but often they are non-linear, reflecting the unpredictability of life itself.

When Couture was a child, an Arapaho elder gave her the name Sanibe, which means "singing woman." Songs became a safe harbour for Couture, a comforting routine, a way to sift through feelings in order to take "cautious steps forward." Fans of her albums get a glimpse behind the curtains at the events that bloomed into her music; those unfamiliar with her work will find poetry in the imaginative lines of her prose.

How to Lose Everything is a short book but every word confronts grief's pain, terror, and desperation with love, tenderness, and heartbreak. The vivid imagery coupled with a songwriter's lyricism act as a fluent and whimsical vessel through turbulent waters, even when addressing complex topics such as abortion and sexuality. *How to Lose Everything* is not a place to turn to for advice. It is not a trauma handbook. The stories offer comfort from someone who says this happened to me, and I not only survived but found a way to grow and blossom from it all. –Caileigh Broatch

Talking to a Portrait: Tales of an Art Curator

Rosalind M. Pepall
Véhicule Press

WHEN ROSALIND M. PEPALL began her career as a curator more than 30 years ago, her job title had a very specific institutional meaning. Curating was a specialized profession requiring a graduate degree and was reserved for caretakers of museum and art gallery collections. But because most people aren't aware of what a curator actually does, the pervading pop-culture stereotypes are of icy, turtlenecked snobs or puttering old men toiling away in dusty tombs.

In her new book, Pepall, a former curator at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, demystifies her profession through 15 essays that highlight favourite career moments and illuminate the



work that goes on behind the scenes of blockbuster exhibitions. There have been few publications on the subject, especially in Canada, that would appeal to a broad audience of museum-goers. While David Balzer's 2014 long-form essay for Coach House Books, *Curationism: How Curating Took Over the Art World and Everything Else*, is a fascinating theoretical look at the profession, Pepall's book contains refreshing insider appeal.

Though conversational in tone – no art jargon here – *Talking to a Portrait* opens with a fairly traditional curatorial essay on Montreal painter Edwin Holgate and his 1930 portrait, *Ludivine* (named for his 15-year-old subject). The piece, which wouldn't seem out of place in an exhibition catalogue, ends abruptly (as many of the essays in the book do) on a quietly remarkable note – Pepall being handed a photograph of the real Ludivine. The moment begs for more emotional inquiry, especially considering that the essay begins with the question, “Has a painting ever brought you to tears?”

Pepall selects interesting details about various artists' lives and works that are personally meaningful to her. But the book is most successful when she shares details of how an exhibition or acquisition came together, such as how she obsessed about Tiffany glass for three years, travelling as far as the revered Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia, in preparation for an upcoming show. The complex operations and risks of moving priceless artifacts are fascinating and Pepall recounts her travels as a courier ensuring their safety. Also illuminating is the curator's role as salesperson: part of Pepall's job is to convince wealthy collectors and other institutions to part with valuable art pieces for extended periods of time.

All this labour is driven by a curatorial vision that occasionally doesn't come to fruition. Those false starts are also entertaining to read about, such as the time Pepall found the perfect 1930s twin-prop airplane for a travelling design exhibition much to the chagrin of the museum's head of installation. She ultimately settled for a vintage Airstream trailer, which was procured at the last minute from the Ohio-based manufacturer and souped up with curtains sewn in-house by MMFA's conservator.

It's an interesting time for a book about curation to appear. Online culture has co-opted the word, which is now used freely by Pinterest enthusiasts and playlist makers to describe what is essentially just choosing stuff. COVID-19 has expanded public interest in online exhibitions that are not attached to a physical space, and as cultural institutions examine their internal policies and histories, some curators find themselves taking on more of an activist role as collections and exhibitions are decolonized from their Eurocentric foundations. Although Pepall doesn't hypothesize over her profession's future, *Talking to a Portrait* serves as a thoughtful remembrance of a fulfilling career and a profession now in flux. –Sue Carter

Cam & Beau

Maria Cichosz
Now or Never Publishing

MARIA CICHOSZ'S DEBUT NOVEL – the first in a projected series – brims with theory and tension. Cam and Beau are long-time best friends and roommates living in Toronto at the beginning of the 21st century. They are tender-hearted stoners whose lives are inextricable from one another. Their devotion is incredibly sweet in

the manner of a classic pairing: the tortured silent one and the partially oblivious one. Cam's reluctance to admit romantic feelings for Beau is put to the test when a mutual friend intervenes by insisting to Cam that Beau shares the same feelings. The resulting narrative is a character-driven, emotionally bumpy ride.

Cichosz weaves literary theory and depictions of smoky, drug-drenched rooms with ease. Cam and Beau are each associated with a particular text by the French structuralist Roland Barthes, and the novel is heavily steeped in the theories of thinkers such as Barthes and Michel Foucault. The third-person narration works well, alternating between Cam's and Beau's experiences – both independently and in tandem – and adding depth and gravity to their story.

The various ways in which boundaries blur or harden between friends and lovers are meticulously examined and reminiscent of Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For*: Cichosz's novel, about young people just trying to eke out an existence in Toronto amid ongoing personal and external crises, has a punchy, complex, youthful tone.

Some aspects of the book feel oddly artificial, especially regarding Cliff, the drug-dealer friend



who never demands money for supplying a tremendous amount of drugs. The representation of one of the only women in the novel veers slightly into academic, manic-pixie-dream-girl territory. She is portrayed as an enemy or punching bag, a reductive presentation that seems out of place given the expansive portrayals of the title characters.

Nonetheless, it's refreshing to read a fast-paced, highly dramatic novel about queerish characters. *Cam & Beau* includes many intense hurdles and ill-informed decisions, but the story always manages to allow its protagonists to find solace and safety regardless.

–Jackie Mlotek

SUPERHEROES AND VILLAINS

Crusaders and vigilantes

In fiction and reality, superheroes and villains provide a fascinating glimpse into the landscape of our modern world **BY ROBERT J. WIERSEMA**

★ **Hench**

Natalie Zina Walschots

William Morrow

The Rise of Real-Life Superheroes: And the Fall of Everything Else

Peter Nowak

Douglas & McIntyre

ANNA TROMEDLOV, the anti-hero of Natalie Zina Walschots's stunning debut novel, *Hench*, isn't drawn to villainy because of any deep-seated issues or evil intent. For Anna, temporary work as a henchperson to supervillains is just a way to make ends meet, a logical extension of the gig economy. It isn't glamorous – data entry is data entry, no matter what the profession – but her patchwork freelance life keeps her in ramen. Everything changes, though, when the nefarious plans of her current employer, Electric Eel, are foiled by Supercollider (with assistance from Accelerator and Quantum Entanglement). Anna is left seriously injured and jobless.

During her recovery, Anna starts to calculate the true cost, environmental and otherwise, of superheroes – “Supercollider was as bad for the world as an earthquake.” She also draws the attention of Supercollider's arch-nemesis, Leviathan, “the monster lurking beneath the surface of the world.” Leviathan hires Anna, assists with her recovery, gives her control of a team, and enables her to pursue revenge against Supercollider and his ilk. The Auditor is born.

Part origin story, part revenge drama, part workplace comedy, *Hench* is a hilarious and frequently bloody deconstruction of the superhero mythos from the point of view of its collateral damage. Anna is a sharply drawn, utterly realistic character, so steeped in the vagaries of “contemporary existence” as to be almost emblematic of our cultural fragmentation. The novel is also incisively smart, clear-eyed in its examination not only of familiar superhero tropes but of the way those tropes shape and are shaped by society at large. The relationship between Supercollider and Quantum Entanglement, for example, is a vivid parsing of “traditional” relationships, enforced gender roles, and societal double standards.

As smart as it is, though, *Hench* is also pure



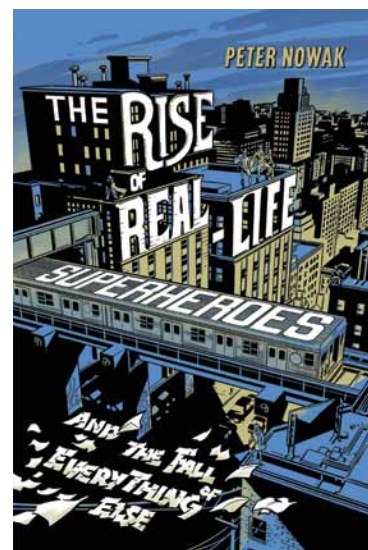
reading delight. Walschots clearly knows her comics, and her storytelling is sheer pleasure, from Anna's defensive snarkiness to the novel's dynamic handling of scene (you can picture the epic double-page spreads in your head) to the final confrontation between Anna and Supercollider, which will have readers cheering and cringing in equal measure. *Hench* is an instant classic, the sort of book you'll want to protect in a mylar sleeve while you wait – and hope – for the arrival of the second issue.

While Walschots uses the lens of fiction to parse the role of superheroes in our society, Toronto-based journalist Peter Nowak takes a different tack. In *The Rise of Real-Life Superheroes*, Nowak examines the caped crusaders prowling the dirty streets and alleys of the real world. Yes, heroes walk among us. From the Xtreme Justice League, “the self-proclaimed guardians of downtown San Diego,” who patrol the nightlife-focused Gaslamp District defusing tensions and breaking up fights, to environmental crusader the Fox and the members of Toronto's Trillium Guard handing out cold weather supplies, these are individuals and groups genuinely making a difference. But why?

Nowak tackles that question with journalistic intensity, tracing real-life superheroes (RLSH) through a history of the comic book medium and an analysis of American vigilante culture. The latter begins with the Wild West and travels

through the community-based actions of the Black Panthers in the 1960s, and the rise of the Guardian Angels in 1970s New York, a decade when the metropolis earned its reputation as Fear City. “The motivations of these groups,” Nowak writes, “regardless of who they were representing or protecting, were similar on a basic level: when there is no one in power to do the job, it's incumbent on citizens to do it for themselves.” RLSH is the latest incarnation of this impulse, fuelled by the ubiquity of comic books and related films and television series.

But it's not just the U.S. and Canada that has experienced this phenomenon: one of the most delightful chapters in the book documents the role of RLSH in Mexico, drawing on the tropes of *lucha libre* wrestling. Nowak's exploration of RLSH in Africa takes a darker note, with the brutal vigilantism of Nigeria's Bakassi Boys contrasted against the rise of “entrepreneurial



efforts” to fill the void in effective, legitimate, and trusted law enforcement.

Crucially, Nowak deals with these RLSH with a completely straight face. While some might consider an adult dressing up in repurposed athletic gear to attempt social change as laughable, Nowak delves beneath the often ridiculous surface to seriously examine not only the motivations of these costumed heroes but their effectiveness and their role in society. He doesn't take the heroes at face value (especially when it comes to figures like the beer-guzzling Masked Legend in Orlando, Florida) but does put them in a larger context. “Whatever your view may be of real-life superheroes, it's hard to dispute the purity of the message they espouse,” Nowak writes. “[A]nyone who wants to change the world must first start by changing themselves.”

Up to no good

In *Barry Squires, Full Tilt*, two boys and a baby run wild in St. John's

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Super heroes

Feminists have the power in Mirion Malle's non-fiction, gender-theory comic

PAGE 40

Prized possession

Cary Fagan's first graphic novel tells the story of his father's beloved dictionary

PAGE 41

Books for Young People



▲ *The Wrench*

PICTURE BOOKS

Just for laughs

Three new releases are filled with Elise Gravel's signature jokes, gags, and wit **BY SUE CARTER**

Arlo & Pips: King of the Birds

Elise Gravel

HarperAlley, Ages 6–10

The Wrench

Elise Gravel; Charles Simard, trans.

Orca Book Publishers, Ages 3–5

Not Me

Elise Gravel

Scholastic Canada, Ages 3–8

THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL COMEDY is knowing when to land the joke. With her three new kids' titles, Montreal author Elise Gravel demonstrates a talent for comedic timing, firmly establishing her status as one of the funniest writers working

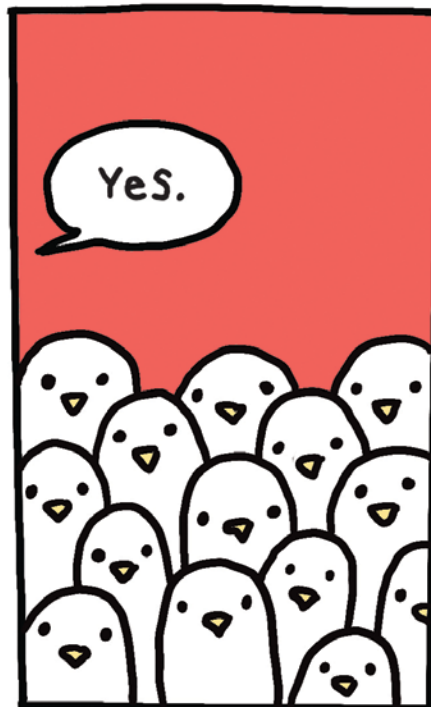
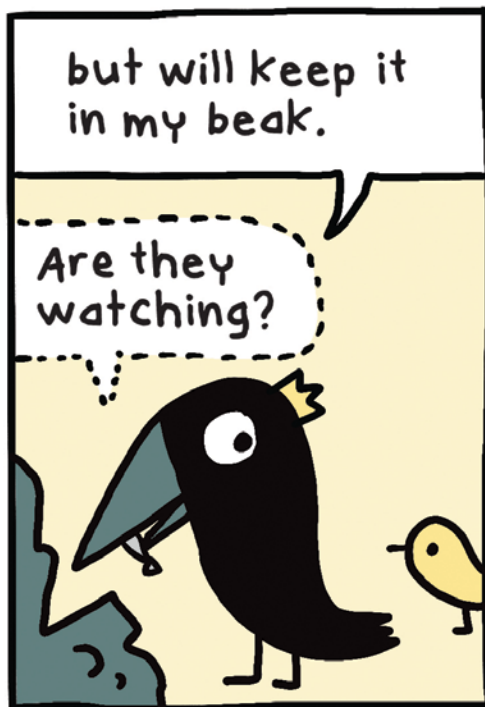
across all genres in Canada today.

A scene in *Arlo & Pips: King of the Birds*, the first instalment in Gravel's entertaining new graphic-novel series for HarperAlley, finds greedy crow Arlo hiding a rotting fish from a group of marauding gulls. They're coming at Arlo and his tiny avian friend, Pips, from all sides, like something out of *The Birds*. "Are they watching?" Arlo whispers to Pips, standing quietly with the stinky carrion tucked inside his beak. "Yes," says Pips in the next frame, which is dominated by rows of gull faces shocked at the disappearance of their targeted snack. Visual jokes like this work not only because Gravel lets them breathe, but because she conveys so much storytelling through her characters' simple expressions.

Arlo is always bragging about his species' many talents, like his amazing memory capacity, collecting prowess, and ability to create tools. And while Gravel backs up his claims with factual pullouts about crow intelligence, Pips is there to take Arlo down a notch whenever he acts too boastful. But like the best buddy comedies, there is a give-and-take and a sense of true friendship between the pair – Gravel's humour is never mean – even though it is clear Arlo's brain is that much bigger.

The Wrench may look like a throwback with its mid-21st century palette, but its content is of the moment. Poor Bob, who appears to be a cross between an alien rabbit and a pig, breaks a wheel on his tricycle. And so he heads to Megamart, a gaudy general store. He is immediately distracted by a mustachioed salesperson in a cowboy-style uniform who could be a stand-in for the Beatles' Blue Meanies. The wily salesperson convinces Bob that wrenches are boring – what he really needs is a fridge-hat.

Bob is sure his friends will be dazzled, but instead they admonish the gimmicky headpiece: "Weren't you supposed to buy a wrench?" asked Paulette. And so Bob trudges back to Megamart. This exchange happens two more times, with Bob being persuaded to buy musical pyjamas



▲ Arlo & Pips

and then an ear-piercing Screaming Machine. At this point, Bob runs out of money. Recalling that there may be a few bucks stashed in his closet, he opens the door only to have all his useless purchases fall out and land on his head. (Bob clearly has a shopping problem.) Then he notices among the many games, electronics, and toys – his wrench!

Although Bob gets bonked on the noggin, Gravel does not do so to her young readers. The gentle anticonsumerism message is embedded in an entertaining story, which sees Bob eventually achieve his mission of fixing his tricycle. Does Bob learn a lesson? It's unclear, but that's fine. *The Wrench* is an excellent primer on the value of time and money before the allowance years hit.

In *Not Me*, the payoff lands in the final illustration. When a father (wearing a cute CBC shirt) asks who left dirty socks all over the floor, his two kids blame Not Me, who turns out to be a portly cookie-munching monster. Sputtering denial, Not Me emphatically blames the stubby pink creature, Not True. The blame game continues until Dad sends all four on a time out. It's only then that the real culprit is revealed. Not Fair, with his bag of dirty socks, gets away with the crime with a sneaky “Muah ha-ha!”

Like Bob in *The Wrench*, it's unclear what the future holds for shifty-eyed Not Fair. Not a problem though because the takeaway lesson – making excuses has consequences – is already established. So will Dad ever discover the truth? The delight is in not knowing.



▼ Not Me

My Day with Gong Gong
Sennah Yee and Elaine Chen, ill.
Annick Press, Ages 4–7

THE ADORABLE *My Day with Gong Gong* follows a little girl, May, who's sullen about having to spend the day alone with her grandpa, or gong gong as she calls him in Cantonese. He doesn't know much English, she can't speak much Cantonese, and she's worried about the lack of mutual intelligibility. What follows is a story of the importance of nurturing intergenerational relationships.

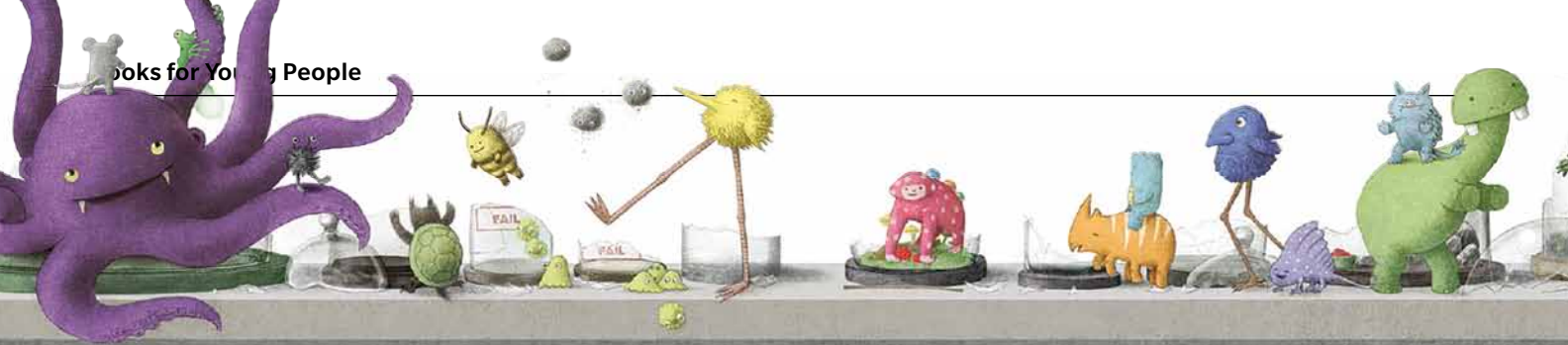
May's day with her gong gong is sketched out by illustrator Elaine Chen in colourful renderings that resemble cartoon animation done with watercolours. The images are light and fluid while containing a high level of detail. The scenes of Toronto's Chinatown are a particular treat, with its vendors, restaurants, and street musicians drawn with bright, happy strokes. Parents can point out Spadina Avenue's recognizable street corners, pigeons, and streetcars.

Sennah Yee writes the story in simple, accessible language that's nonetheless musical and

▲ *My Day with Gong Gong*

fun to say out loud, allowing readers and listeners a chance to explore the sounds and shapes of different words, and the way they fit together like notes in a song. The text is interspersed with a few basic Cantonese greetings and phrases – including nei hou (hello) and ngo oi nei (I love you) – and a page of translations is found at the end of the book.

At the conclusion of the story's gentle and touching moral arc, May learns that just because her gong gong communicates with her in different ways doesn't mean he's not paying attention. She comes to see how older relatives can help you engage with your culture, develop patience, and grow as a person. Though it may take effort, patience, and adjustment, staying connected with your elders and community members can be fulfilling and emotionally significant. –Nour Abi Nakhoul



▲ *The Barnabus Project*

PICTURE BOOKS

Stranger things

New stories about idiosyncratic creatures and unconventionally clothed ghosts prove there's strength in difference **BY EMILY DONALDSON**

★ **The Barnabus Project**

Terry, Eric & Devin Fan

Tundra Books, Ages 5–9

The Little Ghost Who Was a Quilt

Riel Nason and Byron Eggenschwiler, ill.

Tundra Books, Ages 3–7

SINCE THEIR DEBUT PICTURE BOOK, 2016's *The Night Gardener*, bagged a variety of honours and awards, the Fan brothers – who until now have consisted of illustrators Eric and Terry Fan – have moved from strength to strength, bringing their warmly surreal, fantastical style to books by other authors, including *The Darkest Dark*, a collaboration with author Kate Fillion and astronaut Chris Hadfield, and *The Antlered Ship*, with text by Dashka Slater.

The Barnabus Project represents the Fans' third outing as both illustrators and writers (after 2018's *Ocean Meets Sky*) and the first with a third brother, Devin Fan (roles aren't delineated in the book's credits). The more the merrier, apparently. *The Barnabus Project* is every bit as darkly and delightfully evocative as its predecessors – perhaps more so.

For as long as he can remember, Barnabus, a mouse-sized elephant, has lived in a multi-storey laboratory deep beneath the Perfect Pets store, itself located on a “perfectly ordinary” (and very Toronto-looking) street. The lab is where so-called perfect pets, for the most part fluffy, big-eyed monsters sold in boxes, get made; it's also where failed experiments – goofily idiosyncratic creatures like Barnabus – wither in bell jars until they can be “recycled.” Though he's not mistreated, Barnabus nevertheless dreams of escaping and visiting the fabled above-ground world described by his cockroach friend, Pip: a world of green trees and tall buildings (a.k.a. “mountains that reached all the way to

the sky, lit with their own stars”).

The book's strength-in-difference message is standard issue at this point. It's the clandestine, sinister-adjacent world of the lab – at whose heart sits the ultimate failed project: a gigantic, one-eyed, octopus-like creature elaborately encased in metal and swirling ductwork – that thrillingly stirs the imagination and emotions. In the Fan brothers' hands, the result feels like a happy amalgam of Jules Verne, Maurice Sendak, the Moomins, and *Monsters, Inc.*

Same theme, different setting, you might say of Riel Nason's *The Little Ghost Who Was a Quilt*, whose basic scenario and conundrum are right there in the title. Everyone knows that ghosts are sheets, not quilts; cue the opening image of a little quilt-ghost gazing forlornly out an attic porthole window at a sky full of conventional sheet-ghosts. Why is he a quilt? Though the ghost's parents were sheets, his great-grandmother was “an elegant lace curtain,” and at least one known ancestor was a checkered tablecloth.

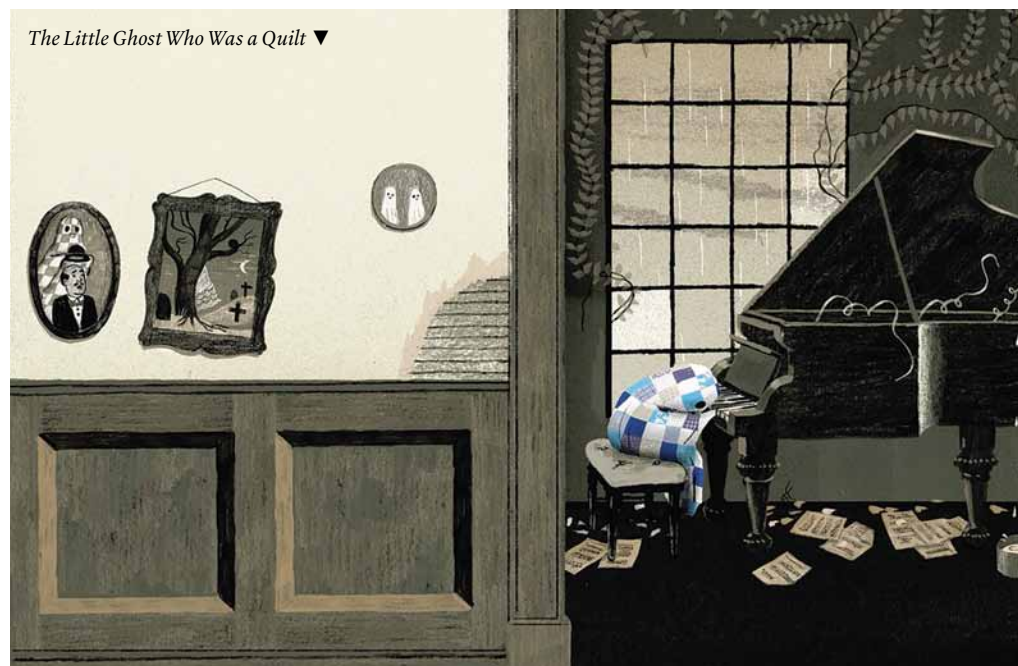
The main drawback of being a quilt-ghost

turns out to be less aesthetic – though he is called “scrappy” – than kinetic. Heavier and more ungainly than sheets, quilts aren't great at takeoffs or speed: a major issue when the sudden arrival of humans necessitates a swift exit.

When Halloween arrives, our ghost, unable to hover on his favourite night, drapes himself over a porch rail, where he's serendipitously picked up by a mother who wraps him around her chilled trick-or-treating daughter. Elated by his sudden usefulness, the ghost doesn't even mind when the girl later uses him as a napkin. When the mother runs her fingers appreciatively over his stitching, that little bit of admiration puts the wind in the ghost's proverbial sails.

Nason's book, sweet without being saccharine, is itself held aloft by Byron Eggenschwiler's understated illustrations: the quilt's blue squares, an orange pumpkin, and the little girl's pink tutu all pop subtly against an otherwise muted, monochrome palette and blacks that fall just shy of menacing. Throughout the book, Eggenschwiler's focus moves seamlessly from ghost's-eye view to quilt close-ups and points in between while throwing out some playful details: an owl roosting in a grandfather clock, a sheet-ghost collapsed in giggles at some unheard joke. In addition to these visual pleasures, *The Little Ghost Who Was a Quilt* also offers a sly twist on the transformative power of Halloween.

The Little Ghost Who Was a Quilt ▼



EDITOR'S CHOICE

Everybody cut footloose

There's plenty of fancy footwork and good feelings in Heather Smith's latest YA novel **BY SHANDA DEZIEL**

Barry Squires, Full Tilt

Heather Smith

Penguin Teen Canada, Ages 12+

THE TENDENCY TO MAKE EVERYONE and everything in Newfoundland seem good-natured, offbeat, and comical has become a fatiguing stereotype and it somewhat tempers enjoyment of the first bit of *Barry Squires, Full Tilt*.

But in the hands of Heather Smith, who is currently on a roll of critical acclaim – thanks to the 2017 YA novel *The Agony of Bun O'Keefe*, the 2018 middle-grade novel-in-verse *Ebb & Flow* (which is the reigning TD Canadian Children's Literature Award winner), and the 2019 picture book *The Phone Booth in Mr. Hirota's Garden* – the initially clichéd East Coast eccentricity of *Barry Squires* turns into something warm and endearing.

The titular character is a 12-year-old St. John's native who just wants to tap dance. Specifically, he wants to join the Full Tilt Dancers, a *Riverdance*-style troupe that is the city's second-most popular entertainment attraction after the bagpiper Alfie Bragg and his Agony Bag.

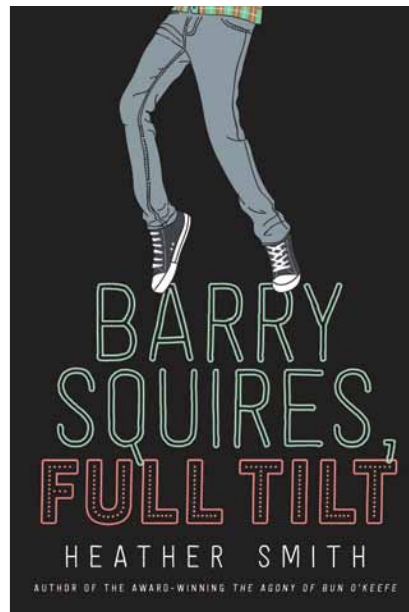
Barry comes from a loving family, which includes his nan; mom (who's got the "baby blues"); clocksmith dad; older sister, Shelagh; older brother, Pius; and baby brother, Gord. Having seen Barry's moves, they're not betting on his success. "It was hard to hold my matador pose with Shelagh huffing and Mom tutting and Pius swearing under his breath," says Barry. "They'll be sorry, I thought, when their cold, dead hearts come to life at the sight of me soaring over the sofa." It's this passion (more than poise) that earns him a spot in the troupe.

Unfortunately, his quick temper and self-consciousness about a port-stain birthmark on his face often work against Barry, causing him to take a swing at anyone who teases or crosses him. And his inflated sense of his talent doesn't do him any favours in the team tap atmosphere.

When he's not dancing, Barry meets up with his new friend, Saibal, who's a bit cheeky and has zero tolerance for Newfoundlanders who think he's an immigrant because of his brown skin. Meanwhile, he'll happily con some money out of tourists who assume he's a poor refugee. The fact that Saibal then uses that money to buy

food for local panhandlers just makes him that much more of a complex character.

The two preteens find plenty of "no good to get up to" – as Saibal describes it – mouthing off to a number of respectable citizens along the way. But the fact that everywhere they go, they're happily pushing six-month-old Gord in a stroller makes these wannabe shit-disturbers adorably sweet and ultimately harmless. When a convenience store clerk won't sell them a pornographic magazine (which they plan to trade an older teen for tap shoes), Barry gives the mag to the baby – who proceeds to rip it. "Saibel pointed to the YOU BREAK IT, YOU BUY IT sign. He slapped a five dollar bill on the counter. 'That should cover it.'"



While Barry's tap dance exploits and the scenes of familial squabbling are wildly entertaining, the young boys' burgeoning friendship gives the story its heart.

After veering away from caricatures, Smith fully commits to the Squires and their circle of friends, and her fondness for them is contagious. The trick with this novel is to go into it knowing nothing about what ultimately befalls the family, what knocks them down and gets them back up. Under those circumstances, this is one foot-stompingly enjoyable, while also heart-rending, read.

★ No Vacancy

Tziporah Cohen

Groundwood Books, Ages 9–12

IN THIS PROVOCATIVE contemporary middle-grade novel, Tziporah Cohen introduces readers to 11-year-old Miriam and her family as they move to Greenvale, New York, to run the Jewel Motor Inn. Even as she helps to fix up the motel, Miriam wants nothing more than to be back home in Manhattan. But when the family can't



get the business off the ground and failure becomes imminent, Jewish Miriam and her new Catholic friend, Kate, take matters into their own hands and devise a plan to attract tourists.

To their surprise, the plan works, and the motel is completely booked. That's when Miriam begins to question the morality of her actions: is a lie always a bad thing? Moreover, she can't make sense of her mom's reluctance in inviting their new friends from the motel and around town to Shabbat dinner. Before Miriam gets the answers she's searching for, a hate crime at the motel threatens to ruin everything she and her family have worked so hard to build. Kate's priest, Father Donovan, offers Miriam this hope: "At its worst, religion can make us hate each other, make us suspicious of people who believe differently from what we believe. But at its best, I believe religion can bring out the good in all of us."

With effortless mastery, Cohen weaves the opposing forces of innocence and corruption, right and wrong, love and hate. Miriam navigates internal and external conflicts with the help of fully developed secondary characters, including Father Donovan, Miriam's Uncle Mordy, and

her friend Anton. Each one speaks with heartwarming tenderness about differences and how they impact people's lives.

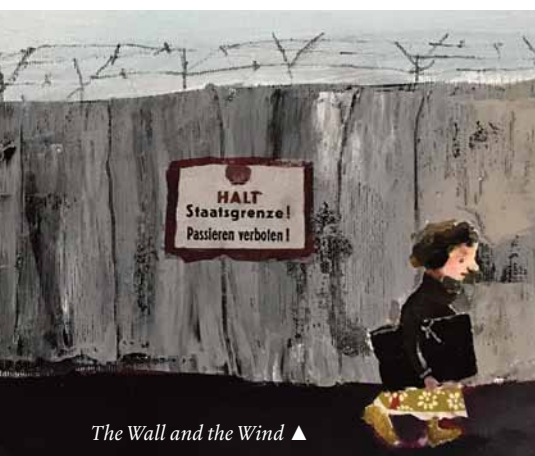
No Vacancy addresses the reality of anti-Semitism, hate, and prejudice prevalent in the daily lives of so many. Cohen makes clear that an act of hatred has the capacity to not only leave a lasting scar but also break the victim's spirit. Readers will see that the difference between dividing and uniting a community is contained in small yet powerful gestures of acceptance, kindness, and love. —*Inderjit Deogun*

The Wall and the Wind

Veselina Tomova

Running the Goat, Books & Broad-sides, Ages 4–8

THE WALL AND THE WIND is a story of resilience. It follows an imaginative girl whose dreams are blocked by the Berlin Wall. She lives east of the wall but wants to travel west so that she might have greater freedom to follow her passions. Decades pass, the wall falls, and the girl moves to a new land called, appropriately, Newfoundland. The nameless girl's journey is based on the



The Wall and the Wind ▲

life of author-illustrator and designer Veselina Tomova, an asylum-seeker from Bulgaria who has lived in Newfoundland for more than 30 years.

This book could have been structured with a tired transformation that shows a sad before and a happy after, but life is rarely that black and white. Instead, *The Wall and the Wind* progresses in three parts, distinguished by their illustrations. The opening spreads are charming and bright: even though the girl's world is physically restricted, she enjoys much love and a limitless imagination. The ominous wall, and the suffering it has caused, is contained within

six grey and forbidding pages. The rest of the book offers a return to bright colours and a vibrant future. Just as the illustrations alternate between celebratory and sombre, so does the typography. Rigid lines of text centred on the page resemble a chipped-away wall. These are supplanted by bendy and curvy lines that look to be floating through the air.

The multimedia illustrations are rich and layered in both concept and construction. Their handcrafted appearance – with visible brush strokes, scratchings that cut through paint to show the canvas, and glued-on feathers, fabrics, and cut-outs of embroidered flowers – visually conveys something of the depth and texture of lived experience.

On the whole, *The Wall and the Wind* is more breezy than heavy. That said, some of the language is challenging for young audiences, and the depictions of the Berlin Wall are intimidating. The book prompts some difficult but potentially productive conversations, tempered with a reassuringly happy ending. —*Amanda Lastoria*

The League of Super Feminists

Mirion Malle; Aleshia Jensen, trans.

Drawn & Quarterly, Ages 10–14

HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN FEMINISM to a child? As an academic trained in critical theory, this is the question that I assumed would be at the core of Mirion Malle's *The League of Super Feminists*, translated from French by Aleshia Jensen. However, the book does such a great job of making obvious the simple logic of what feminism is that one thing becomes clear early on: *Super Feminists* is not about teaching a theoretical framework. Its aim is to give children the tools they need to understand the society in which they live – to understand why the world can be so unfair toward girls, and how girls and allies can push back against society's restrictive gendered social messaging.

Super Feminists teaches young readers how to take a critical look at those aspects of life they're taught to see as "normal" – media representation, ideals of beauty and romance, etc. The book argues that those things are not normal at all, but instead carefully constructed and continually perpetuated by a society often unwilling to let girls know that they can actually be anything they want to be.

Super Feminists does not use traditional comic-book panels. It displays a few sentences, sometimes short paragraphs, of explanatory

information punctuated by illustrated hypothetical examples, dialogue, and simple games to help children understand the material. It anticipates arguments and counters them, and sometimes sets aside entire pages of wordless artwork to do its arguing for it. Malle's decision not to rely on traditional panels allows the book to use other creative ways to organize the information. Assuming that readers will read left to right, the book employs arrows, number sequences, and strategically placed borders to guide the readers' eyes. It provides some structure while giving readers a little room to explore each page on their own.

The work of gender theorists, including Judith Butler and Gayle Rubin, underpins Malle's simple and honest delivery. Butler in particular is responsible for pioneering work on gender performativity: the concept that people learn

IT HELPS US BUILD REAL ALLIANCES BETWEEN PEOPLE WHO SUFFER UNDER DIFFERENT SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION SO WE CAN FIGHT AGAINST THESE SYSTEMS TOGETHER!!!



▲ *The League of Super Feminists*

at a young age what it means to be a boy and a girl by being encouraged to behave, speak, think, and desire in a certain way. Malle distills complicated feminist theory into easy-to-understand explanations without ever talking down to readers. Because of the respectful tone, this book can just as easily be given to adults. The artwork, which at times can feel a little too rudimentary, allows the reader to concentrate on the lessons while adding a splash of colour with helpful visual aids.

I most appreciated Malle's highlighting of intersectionality. Early feminist movements made the mistake of focusing solely on heteronormative white women, leading to the continued oppression of women of other marginalized groups. *Super Feminists* shows how intricately connected gender ideals are to ideas of sexuality, class, and race, turning this book into the inclusive read it needs to be in order to truly be a transformative work. —*Sarah Raughley*

Maurice and His Dictionary: A True Story
Cary Fagan and Enzo Lord Mariano, ill.
Owlkids Books, Ages 8–12

MAURICE AND HIS DICTIONARY is a distinguished non-fiction graphic novel from Toronto author Cary Fagan, based on his father's experience during the Holocaust.

In 1940 Brussels, following the Nazi invasion, 14-year-old Maurice and his family flee their home in the middle of the night. Years of persecution and displacement follow for the Fajgenbaums until they eventually find passage onboard the SS *Serpa Pinto*, bound for a refugee camp in Jamaica. Maurice's father's resolute assuredness is a beacon throughout their harrowing journey: "Solve one problem, and then the next, and then the next. That's how you move forward."

Maurice also finds solace in his father's conviction that "the law will make us all equal." The eager student feasts on knowledge shared by teachers he meets while interned at Gibraltar Camp, which housed evacuees in Jamaica. Maurice learns English by studying Chambers's

Twentieth Century Dictionary, purchased from the sale of leather goods made by the family in secret. The words he recites are prophetic: "Position, positive, possible..." Through resilient determination, 16-year-old Maurice earns acceptance to the University of Toronto.

The graphic-novel format is well suited to this emotionally layered survivor's account. Captions offer Maurice's first-person reflections with a calmness afforded by the distance of time. Expertly paced panels simultaneously convey the gripping, close-up immediacy of the family's experiences, like seeking shelter in an abandoned castle with mice scurrying along the floor. Montreal illustrator Enzo Lord Mariano effectively contrasts sombre, brown-blue wartime hues with warmly glowing sepia-tone washes for Maurice's dreams of becoming a lawyer.

Small, nuanced moments in the text and illustrations are emotively significant: French villagers pass baskets of eggs through train windows to hungry strangers; a homework assignment check-marked with "excellent travail!" lies abandoned on the sidewalk; and loosely sketched soldiers can be glimpsed brusquely



Maurice and His Dictionary ▲

taking away a prisoner.

In a moving afterword, Fagan includes a photograph of his father's dictionary, which now rests on his own desk. With a faded red cover and bound together with tape, it is a poignant reminder of a line from the novel: "Even in dark times, each of us can be a candle, adding a little light to the world." —Linda Ludke

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FINE PRINT: All information was supplied by publishers and may have been tentative at press time.

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Smith, Heather, Barry Squires, *Full Tilt* (Penguin Teen Canada) \$21.99 cloth 978-0-73526-746-6, 232 pp. Sept. 12+ **PAGE 39**

Tomova, Veselina, *The Wall and the Wind* (Running the Goat, Books & BroadSides) \$12.95 paper 978-1-92791-732-8, 38 pp. Oct. Ages 4–8 **PAGE 40**

Yee, Sennah and Elaine Chen, ill., *My Day with Gong Gong* (Annick Press) \$21.95 cloth 978-1-77321-429-0, 36 pp. Sept. Ages 4–7 **PAGE 37**

Hunger for truth

How academic Suzanne Evans uncovered the forgotten story behind a prisoner's cookbook **BY SUE CARTER**

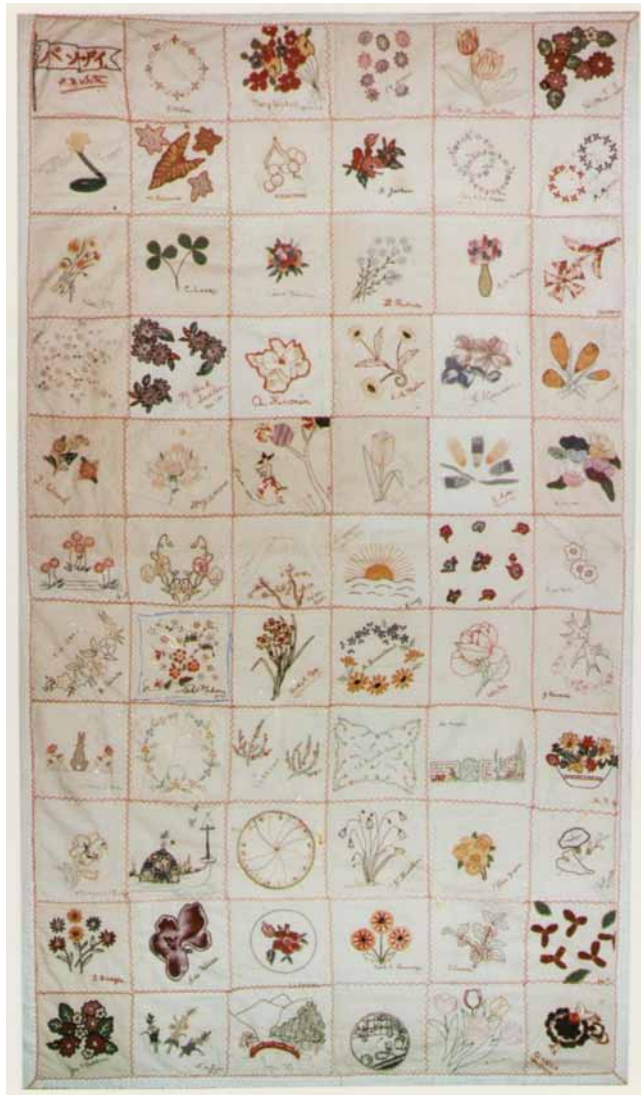
WHILE WORKING AS A RESEARCH FELLOW at the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa academic Suzanne Evans learned of Ethel Mulvany, a Canadian who grew up on Manitoulin Island and was taken into a Japanese POW camp for three years during the Second World War. Mulvany – a Red Cross aid worker and wife of a doctor stationed in Singapore – organized quilt-making sessions at the Changi prison camp, where more than 1,000 women and children were detained.

To help keep spirits up, Mulvany encouraged the imprisoned women to sew hidden messages about their lives into fabric blocks, which were then pieced together into quilts and donated to POW hospitals in hopes that the secret notes would be relayed back to the prisoners' male family members.

When Evans heard the story of how Mulvany would also hold imaginary tea parties where the guests would talk at length about their favourite foods, she couldn't get the scene out of her mind. "I thought, Whoa, that's perverse. How could you sit around talking about food all the time when you have none? And then gradually I wised up: if you're really hungry, what is the one thing that is constantly on your brain?"

Upon her return to Canada, Mulvany collected about 800 of those tea-party recipes into the *Prisoner of War Cook Book* that raised more than \$18,000 for POWs living in Britain. Evans found references to the book's existence, but because Mulvany's name didn't actually appear in its contents – the cover credits "E.R.M." – it was a challenge to track down a copy. After searching desperately online and around the world, Evans eventually unearthed a rare copy that had been housed right there in the war museum library the entire time.

The story gets even more serendipitous. One day, while Evans was driving to yoga class with neighbour and fellow writer Kathy Bergquist, she brought up her latest discovery. Bergquist informed Evans that she knew Mulvany's nieces, who coincidentally lived nearby. Would she like an introduction?



▲ Ethel's photo of a quilt made in Changi, 1942



▲ Portrait of Ethel in Changi by Joan Stanley-Cary

As it turns out, one of Mulvany's nieces, Marion King, inherited all of her aunt's wartime ephemera after she died in 1992. That collection and conversations with other family members helped inform Evans's new biography, *The Taste of Longing: Ethel Mulvany and Her Starving Prisoners of War Cookbook*, publishing this fall with Between the Lines.

"That was a real breakthrough," says Evans. "It was pure serendipity."

King provided Evans access to photographs, stories, and other personal objects. Evans was able to examine up close Mulvany's copy of the Bible and the 1932 *Five Roses Cook Book* that were in her possession at the camp, and see where she had eaten the spines off the books in hopes of ingesting some protein from the binding glue.

"It was like stepping into rich ground over and over again," says Evans. "Each time I went to visit her something new would come up. Marion was very generous in sharing her stories."

King also shared with Evans a digital copy of reel-to-reel recordings from 1961 in which Mulvany, who was living on Manitoulin at the time, is interviewed for 15 hours by *Maclean's* journalist Sidney Katz. Despite the poor sound qual-

ity, Evans found the recordings powerful. "I loved her voice and I wanted that to be at the forefront," says Evans, who notes that the first draft of her manuscript was very dense with quotes taken from the tapes. "Ethel could just dominate any room that she was in. And there she was, dominating me and the structure of my book from beyond the grave. I finally took hold of it and said, 'No, I'm going to tell your story because I've got this perspective.'"

As a result, *The Taste of Longing* reads more like a well-researched piece of creative non-fiction than the academic publication that Evans originally envisioned when she first learned of Mulvany's life. She says, "I was

thanking the research material very much but then letting this incredible story take over." **Q**



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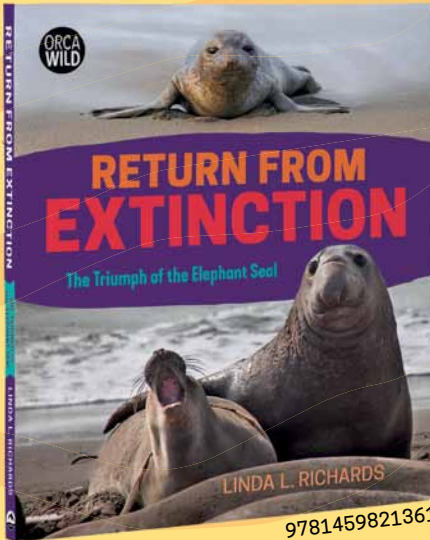


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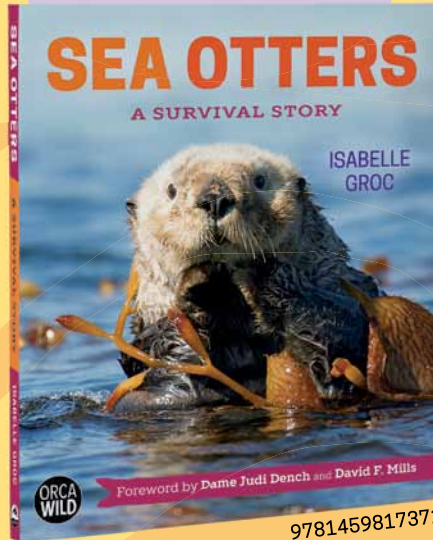
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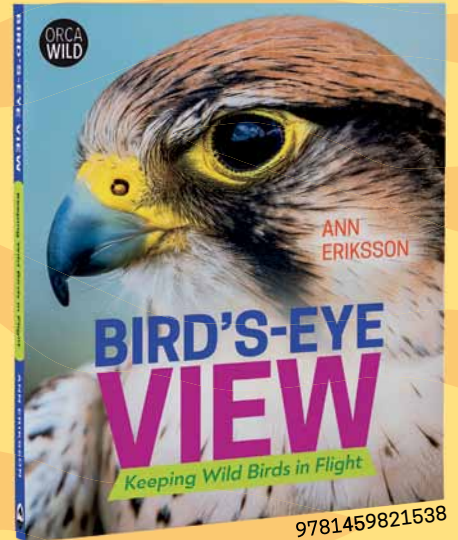
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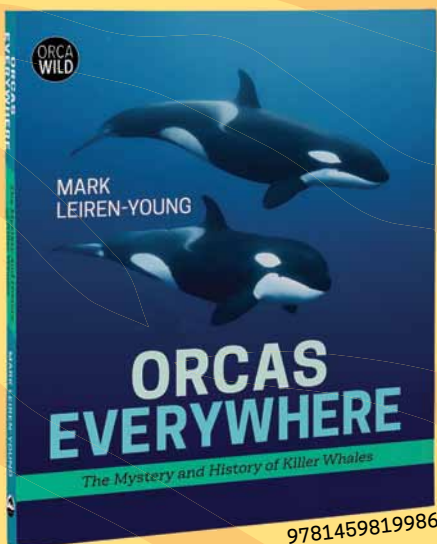
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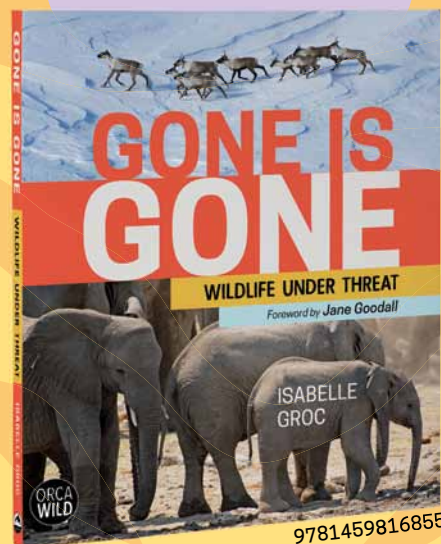
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