

## ***Contemporary Canadian Adult Books for Strong Teen Readers***

by

***Margaret Mackey***

with

***Gail de Vos, Heather Ganshorn, Ingrid Johnston, Jill Kedersha McClay, and Kristine Moruzi***

With this column, our eighteenth in an ongoing annual series, we present our pick of contemporary Canadian adult publishing that we believe has the potential to appeal to strong teenage readers. We began this work in 1996 believing that good teen readers were seriously under-served when it came to reading advice. Where should they go when they begin to come to the end of the road with young adult literature (as wonderful as much of that literature undoubtedly is)? Who provides guidance on the kinds of adult materials that might speak to a teenager? We saw a vacuum, and we have made efforts to step into that empty space ever since.

As usual, our main selection criterion is that the book should have some kind of youth appeal. Middle-age crises need not apply to appear on these pages. We do not screen for strong language or graphic sex or violence; we assume that a confident teenage reader will not hesitate to put down a book if it does not appeal, for whatever reason. We attempt to include a variety of adult Canadian fiction, poetry, and, more rarely, non-fiction with a literary edge.

For eighteen years, Canadian authors and publishers have spoiled us for choice. This list is far from being definitive. We will feel we have done our job if it inspires some teen readers to give adult literature a chance, and if it encourages them to go out and look for more, we will be delighted.

As usual, my thanks to the reviewers who read for their own pleasure but then take the extra step of issuing an invitation to other readers in the form of these reviews. And our thanks, as ever, also go to ***Resource Links*** for giving this column a home.

A compilation of the previous seventeen columns can be found at <http://www.ualberta.ca/~mmackey/Adult%20Canadian%20Books%202013.pdf>

Over the winter, this new column will be incorporated, and the new collection will appear on that website in the spring of 2014.

### ***Crime and Punishment***

***The Purchase*** by Linda Spalding. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2012. Hdbk.. 368 pages. 978-0771079351

Spalding's novel, set in the early 1900's in Southern Virginia, tells the story of Daniel Dickinson, a young Quaker searching for a place of religious freedom for his new young wife and five children. The realities and hardships of pioneer life are described in full detail, but the heart of the story is Daniel himself and his inner struggle with questions of justice and freedom. As a proclaimed abolitionist, Daniel's decision to buy a young slave, although done with good intentions, leads to a future of unfortunate consequences for himself and for his family. Over the 15-year timespan of the novel, readers become involved with the lives, loves, successes and tragedies of all members of the Dickinson family. Spalding handles this epic with sensitivity and compassion, and a meticulous attention to historical detail. The book, which won the 2012 Governor General's Literary Award, is a must-read for everyone. *IJ*

***Caught*** by Lisa Moore. Toronto: House of Anansi, 2013. Hdbk. 314 pages. 978-0-88784-245-0

This book is a giant chase scene in many ways. At the very beginning, David Slaney escapes from prison, where he has been serving time for trafficking in marijuana. His partner Hearn has managed to avoid incarceration, and he is eager to set up another, larger heist. Somehow it escapes Slaney's notice that he is being lined up for all the risky elements of the enterprise. He heads off to Columbia to bring a large boatload of dope back to Canada, tracked by a policeman who has only one to-do item on his checklist.

So far this sounds like a conventional thriller, and indeed Moore carries off the suspense of the chase very successfully. It is much more than a genre title, however; Slaney's observations about the world and the qualms of the pursuing policeman are beautifully crafted and psychologically precise. Slaney's shifts between the perilous state of his present-tense situation and the moments of his past that explain some of his current predicament are subtly managed. The quality of the observation and the shimmer of the writing make this a memorable as well as compelling read. This is a book that will appeal to a large range of readers. *MM*

***Where the Sun Shines Best*** by Austin Clarke. Toronto: Guernica, 2013. Pbk. 70 pages. 978-1-55071-693-1

This disturbing contemporary story is told in the form of a narrative poem, divided into stanzas of irregular length. It includes three sets of characters: some homeless people sleeping on benches in the Moss Park Armouries in Toronto; three soldiers, drunk, on the eve of heading to Afghanistan; and the narrator who is witness to the crime when the soldiers take umbrage at finding a man asleep on their bench, and beat him to death. A fourth perspective comes late in the book, that of the mother of one of the accused.

The title comes from Al Jolson's song, "Mammy," which he sang in blackface in the first feature-length "talkie," *The Jazz Singer* of 1927. Clarke explores some of the conundrums of that kind of blackface impersonation, which was an element of popular culture for many decades, in order to address questions of immigration and belonging that link the victim, the narrator, and one of the accused, and his mother.

It is not an easy or a pretty story. Clarke is ruthless in his determination to bring light and air into all its dark corners of contradiction and paradox, even if understanding is almost beyond achievement. The result is a memorable and gripping read. *MM*

***Canada*** by Richard Ford. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2012. Hdbk. 420 pages. 978-1-44341-111-0

"First, I'll tell about the robbery our parents committed. Then about the murders, which happened later." Thus begins the latest novel by Pulitzer-Prize-winning author Richard Ford. In 1960, Dell Parsons is 15 years old and living with his parents and his twin sister Berner in Great Falls, Montana when a series of events outside of his control cause his life to unravel. His superficially charming but not-too-bright father has been fired from his Air Force job due to his involvement in a scheme to smuggle stolen beef onto the base. His mother, the bookish daughter of Jewish immigrants, is perpetually unhappy with the turn her life has taken since she unwisely became pregnant with Dell and Berner, and had to marry their father.

The story begins in the weeks before Dell's parents execute their harebrained bank robbery scheme. After they are inevitably caught and jailed, Berner runs away and Dell is taken by his mother's friend to live with her mysterious brother, Arthur Remlinger, in a small town in Saskatchewan. Remlinger is an enigmatic and somewhat sinister man with a murderous past that is about to catch up with him. This isn't an action-packed or fast-moving book; some patience is required on the part of the reader. Yet in each of the book's two major parts, Ford excels at slowly building up an unbearable tension as the naive and introspective Dell moves inexorably toward the fateful events that will shape his future. *HG*

### ***Short Fictions***

***Astray*** by Emma Donoghue. Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 2012. Hdbk. 275 pages. 978-1-44341-079-3

Fans of Emma Donoghue expect intriguing and unusual fiction from her, and her short fictions in ***Astray*** reward us handsomely. The collection hangs together thematically; each of the fourteen stories is a fictional imagining of people who have, in one way or another, gone "astray." Each is developed from a snippet of historical fact or anecdote, which Donoghue supplies at the end of the story - often just a line or short paragraph from a newspaper. The protagonists range across four centuries, making journeys and crossing physical, emotional, and cultural boundaries. Donoghue reveals an autobiographical connection in an Afterword, noting that her attraction to such wandering characters may be rooted in her own journeys - Donoghue has emigrated twice from her native Ireland and currently lives in Canada.

The stories vary widely in tone, setting, time period, and character. Every story stands solidly on its own merits - a rare achievement in a short fiction collection. The collection is a tour de force, demonstrating Donoghue's ability to develop rich and consequential characters from meager historical anecdotes. The stories take place in the Old World and the New. These characters go astray, sometimes ending up outside the bounds of conventional society: A Puritan sees sin in his brethren, a widow looks after her financial security, a zookeeper cares desperately for his beloved elephant, a slave and his mistress flee an abusive master, a young Irish couple write letters as they plan to re-unite in Canada, Klondike gold-miners try to survive the harsh Northern environment, and others. Donoghue's intriguing characters and plots are fully imagined and linger long in the memory. *JKM*

***Dear Life*** by Alice Munro. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2012. Hdbk. 319 pages. 978-0-7710-6486-9

Alice Munro, universally acclaimed as the master of short fiction, is at the top of her form in this weighty collection of stories. Munro's characters are generally small-town people, living narrow, restricted lives in rigidly ordered towns where neighbours keep suspicious eyes on each other. Her characters live in such oppression until a small moment or impulsive decision changes everything. Munro's great mastery lies in her depiction of these tiny moments that change the trajectory of lives. Often, she relates these moments from a clarifying distance of time,

when this shrugging off of convention is illuminated clearly, but also when memory has intervened to cast an interpretive shadow on the catalyst and subsequent events. This collection of stories is one of her richest yet, as readers can understand the full context of the stone dropped into the still water of a life, the ripples outward, and the ultimate calming again of agitated waters.

The final four stories, Munro reveals, are “autobiographical in feeling, though not, sometimes, entirely so in fact” (p.55). These provide a fascinating perspective on a beloved author, as she explores many of the themes that readers enjoy in her fiction: the bewildering, complicated bonds of family, the vagaries of memory, and the strong pull of cultural and familial history. Fans of Munro’s fiction will want to read her more autobiographical turn in these four stories. *JKM*

***The Juliet Diaries*** by Carrie Snyder. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2012. Pbk. 304 pages. 978-1770890022

Snyder’s book, a series of linked short stories set over many decades, was shortlisted for the Governor General’s Literary Awards. The first story begins in Nicaragua in 1984. 10-year-old Juliet Friesen has come to Nicaragua with her parents who are protesting the involvement of the United States in the political affairs of the country. Juliet’s life there is carefree and adventurous with little parental supervision.

In part two of the book, everything changes when her younger brother falls ill and the family moves to Canada to live with her grandmother. Juliet’s life in Canada is a sharp contrast to her earlier years in Nicaragua. Her family is torn apart by a tragedy and Juliet struggles to find her own way to grow up in unfamiliar and often lonely contexts. Snyder’s lyrical prose and subtle images are a delight to read. Later in the book, Juliet’s story of adulthood and her relationship with her own children become more fragmented, creating some challenges for readers to fill the narrative gaps. Most readers, though, should find this an engaging book with unforgettable characters offering insights into the importance of place, culture, family and relationships in our lives. *IJ*

### ***Life Choices***

***The Imposter Bride*** by Nancy Richler. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2012. Pbk. 352 pages. 978-1-44340-402-0

This powerful story of intrigue, identity crisis, love and loss is set in post-war Montreal. When Lily Azerov, a refugee from Poland, arrives in Montreal’s Jewish community as a mail-order bride, she is rejected by her would-be husband but marries his brother instead. Much of the intrigue of the novel revolves around the question of Lily’s true identity, as it becomes clear she is not really the person she claims to be. When Lily abandons her husband and baby daughter and disappears, the mystery deepens. It is left to her daughter to discover answers to this complex question as she searches for the mother she never really knew.

Richler’s novel is written partly in third person, mainly through Lily’s eyes, and partly in first person through her daughter Ruth’s perspective. ***The Imposter Bride*** is a compelling and heart-rending tale that speaks to the struggles and losses endured by so many after World War Two and attests to the power of love to heal. *IJ*

***Maxine*** by Claire Wilkshire. St. John’s, NL: Breakwater Books, 2013. Pbk. 208 pages. 978-1-55081-402-6

Maxine’s friend Cindy has died young of cancer, so when Maxine takes a time-management course, she is ready to address the challenge of owning her life goals. What she really wants to do is write a novel, so she saves her money and takes leave from her job. The discipline of creating a world out of her own words is very daunting to her at first, and in many important ways, this is a novel about writing a novel. Wilkshire does a good job of showing us Maxine’s improvement as a writer throughout this process.

The rest of this book is about Kyle and his parents, who have just moved into Maxine’s neighbourhood. Kyle is nine and, despite herself, Maxine finds herself enjoying his company. His mother, Barb, is a different issue altogether. Barb is lonely, and concerned about her husband; she is also a very determined woman and she inexorably enmeshes Maxine in the complexities of her family life. Maxine has her own friends but she finds it hard to resist Barb’s neediness.

This book starts off very quietly, though the plot thickens in major ways towards the end of the story. It is an enjoyable read; Maxine and Kyle and Barb are all vivid figures, and some of the fictional characters in Maxine’s novel provide a kind of side commentary on the plot. *MM*

***The Age of Hope*** by David Bergen. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2012. Hdbk. 287pages. 978-1-44341135-6

Bergen’s novel is an absorbing story of the life of Hope Plett, who was born in a small Manitoba town in 1930. The book follows the changes in her outer and emotional life from the time she is an attractive teenager training to be a nurse, through the constraints she encounters in her conventional life as a wife and mother and her

changing role in later life. Hope's predictable existence during the 1950s and 1960s is constantly challenged by her desire for a more exciting life. She is prompted to make changes to a mundane existence by her friendship with a feminist who offers her visions of other lifestyle possibilities. Well written and perceptive, the novel offers a snapshot of evolving times and places and a nuanced portrayal of a woman trying to find herself. *IJ*

### *Life Challenges*

***Bitter Medicine: A Graphic Memoir of Mental Illness*** by Clem and Olivier Martini. Calgary: Freehand Books, 2012. Pbk. 264 pages. 978-1551119281

This memoir is a collaborative effort between Calgary playwright Clem Martini and his brother Olivier, an artist who has schizophrenia. Clem tells the story of his family of four brothers who grew up in Calgary during the 1960s and 1970s. Their lives change drastically in 1976 when the youngest brother, Ben, is diagnosed with schizophrenia. It is a devastating diagnosis, and it ends in tragedy, with Ben's suicide a few months after being released from the psychiatric ward. Ten years later, Olivier starts to exhibit signs of paranoid and delusional behaviour, and receives the same diagnosis. Clem tells the story of his family's efforts to cope with the illness and care for Olivier in a context of deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, when governments closed psychiatric hospitals and wards, but did not replace them with the promised community supports. Olivier moves back and forth between inpatient and outpatient treatment, struggles with the side effects of medication, and tries to find and hold employment. The book is illustrated with his drawings and writings about his experiences. The book makes it clear that the mentally ill have largely been left to fall through the cracks of the Canadian health-care system, with families left to fill the gaps as best they can. While the book is a searing indictment of the non-system of mental health care, it is also a loving portrait of a family coping with incredible challenges. *HG*

*Y* by Marjorie Celona. Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2012. Hdbk. 350 pages. ISBN: 978-0670066377

The quest for identity looms large for everyone in the teenage years, so most teens should identify with Shannon, the protagonist of Marjorie Celona's debut novel, *Y*. Newborn Shannon is left at the doors of the YMCA in Victoria. An older Shannon recounts her history of an early childhood dominated by unsuccessful adoptions and foster placements. Finally, at age five, Shannon is adopted by Miranda, a single mother with a biological daughter Shannon's age. Though Shannon is young, her history has already left her traumatized, and she has a hard time seeing Miranda and her new sister, Lydia-Rose, as her legitimate family. In her teens, Shannon goes looking for her biological parents, whose tragic story alternates in the book with Shannon's own. As Shannon uncovers her roots, she is forced to reexamine her beliefs about identity, love, and family. *HG*

### *Perspectives - Historic and Social*

***The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America*** by Thomas King. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, Hdbk. 304 pages. 978-0-385-66421-9

This highly accessible and idiosyncratic history book offers a glimpse, albeit somewhat sardonic in tone, of the contracts made between the first settlers and the First Nations as well as the subsequent contracts and repercussions from them all. King eloquently begins with his thesis, one that is carried out throughout the entire volume: "Most of us think that history is the past. It's not. It's the stories we tell about the past. That is all it is. Stories, such a definition might make the enterprise of history seem neutral. Benign. Which of course, it isn't" (2).

It isn't comfortable reading either, although it is highly comprehensible. The subject matter and the insider knowledge and contemplation should produce introspective thought and necessary ongoing discussions among readers and citizens of today's global society. One major theme which delighted this reviewer was the focus on the entertainment industry and its influence on shaping popular perceptions about aboriginal peoples. King refers to the "dead" Indians as the stereotypes embraced and encouraged by western civilization and the "live" ones who are contemporary folk who, according to King and part of the rationale for his title, are "inconvenient" for the rest of society.

Preceded by a prologue underlining the scope and rationale for the book, each of the ten chapters carries an evocative title and begins with relevant quotes or poems. Several pages of acknowledgements are followed by a comprehensive index so while the writing may be informal, the scholarship behind the text is not. Filled with humour, satire, popular culture references, historical facts and factoids, healing, and painted with tensions and pretensions from all participants, King's book should be required reading for all mature young adults to further their comprehension of contemporary issues such as the Idle No More Movement. *GdV*

## *Perspectives - Poetic*

***The Book of Marvels: A Compendium of Everyday Things*** by Lorna Crozier. Vancouver: Greystone Books/ D & M Publishers, 2012. Hdbk. 131 pages. 978-1-926812-75-5

Poet Lorna Crozier turns to prose for this set of meditations on ordinary things in our daily lives, but she hovers near the borderline of poetry all the same. In her alphabetical list of topics, she roves from air and apple to vaginas, yo-yos, and zippers, with hands, hats, and hearts in between, in a total of 124 entries. Some of her themes are very ordinary and every-day in their impact: ironing boards, for example, or kitchen sinks. Others are broader in their impact: the word “no” gets its own entry: “Be careful what you say no to. Too much of it dulls your taste buds, terminates temerity, turns off the lights in the pleasure centre of your brain” (81).

As with all her writing in whatever form, Crozier finds ways to slow down our observing and our thinking, to increase our powers of noticing things. She sees, and then she wonders what it means, and then she plays games with language to open up her readers’ eyes and sense of wonder. The outcome of such work, whether rendered in poetry or prose, is a gift to her readers. *MM*

## *Lives and Deaths*

***Taking My Life*** by Jane Rule. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2011. Pbk. 276 pages. 978-0-88922-673-9

Working with the papers of the late Canadian author Jane Rule, scholar Linda Morra was startled to discover this autobiography lurking among the documents; the catalogue had made no mention that it existed. Both a hand-written and a typescript copy survived, showing a few small changes but generally confirming that Rule had paid serious attention to this work. The opening sentence reads, “Writing an autobiography may be a positive way of taking my own life.” (1) Rule hoped to find patterns and direction in what she describes as a “hard and threateningly pointless journey.” (1)

Rule was born and grew up in the United States. Her family moved frequently and she changed schools often. Her older brother was hostile, and her younger sister yearned for more attention than Rule was ever inclined to pay her. There was some family money that allowed at least some of Rule’s schooling to be privately purchased, but she struggled greatly to fit in at school. Such elements of her youth as shooting up to a height of six feet, becoming aware that her sexual feelings oriented to other women, and struggling to find a way of becoming a writer did not make it any easier for her to fit in, and the sense of being a misfit and an outsider dominates many of these pages.

Rule was born in 1931. Given the times, it is striking how nonchalantly she refers to the way her lesbianism affected her life decisions. For the most part, this aspect of her life is simply a fact like other facts; her specific problems arise out of details in particular relationships with individual lovers rather in a larger and more generic way out of her sexual orientation - rather like the way that most heterosexuals describe their love lives, in fact. Her inability for many years to find a way to challenge her wide-ranging mind seems to be a more dominant issue in her life.

This book provides a detailed ramble through one girl’s youth - unremarkable in some ways, compelling in others. *MM*

***Nocturne: On the Life and Death of My Brother*** by Helen Humphreys. Toronto: HarperCollins 2013. Hdbk. 195 pages. 978-1-44341-545-3

This is a book about being a sibling: “the similarities are buried so deep in the cells that they aren’t questioned or acknowledged - they just are.” (178) Helen Humphreys grew up with a younger brother and a still younger sister. She and her brother shared a wish to become an artist, and each succeeded, she as a writer and he as a concert pianist and occasional composer.

When he was 45, Martin Humphreys died of pancreatic cancer. He was diagnosed in July and dead by December of 2009. In this book of 45 sections, one for each year of his life, his sister speaks to him about what it has meant to her to grow up with him and to learn to live without him. The incidentals of their age - she mentions her fiftieth birthday during the course of the book - are the least important element of this account. It is a book about brothers and sisters, about too early death, and about what remains of that relationship when one partner is gone.

It is difficult to imagine reading this book in anything but a single sitting. Humphreys’ grief is palpable and very painful, but her ability to articulate it and to lay out in words what Martin meant to her is powerful and very moving. Being a sister, being a brother, is one of the earliest relationships of anyone’s life, and very often the longest-lasting. Those who have lost a sibling will be grateful to find so many inexpressible feelings articulated here; those who still rejoice in a full family will be surprised to explore the strength and scale of a relationship that most of

us take for granted most of the time. *MM*

### ***Other Times, Other Places***

***The Tale-Teller*** by Susan Glickman. Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2012. Pbk. 215 pages. 978-1-770-86205-0

Non-Catholics need not apply for immigration to New France, Quebec in the early 1700s and those of the Jewish faith who refused to convert would never be considered for entry. When a young female, disguised as a male, arrives by ship, she is exposed as female but not as of the Jewish faith. For the first year, teenage Esther, educated and imaginative, tells stories to avoid deportation. This comes to an abrupt end, however, when she is forced to tell her own story and thus, propels her expulsion from the new colony regardless of the contacts she has made.

Based on a historical character, Glickman's Esther Brandeau is a master storyteller, mesmerizing her audiences with sounds, tastes and visions of the countries and adventures she relates. Her stories, always relevant to her specific predicament of the moment, are a pleasurable injection to the rather grim painting of the colony and its inhabitants and governors. A strong sense of place is established by Glickman's poetic writing and while not all of her characters are full bodied, the main character is strong, independent, resourceful and accessible. Perhaps a little too much so, this Esther seems to encompass more contemporary traits than the historical one may have had...but still, the historical Esther did have her adventures.

Glickman provides source notes for the historical characters and for several of the traditional folktales told by the fictional Esther. She also mentions several previous novels about Esther Brandeau which she states she did not read until after this manuscript had been submitted. Recommended for young adult readers who are seeking historical fiction and a good yarn. *GdV*

***Thirst*** by Shree Gharage. Toronto: Doubleday Canada (Random House), 2012. Hdbk. 284 pages. 978-0-385-66665-7

Set in London and India during World War Two, *Thirst* is a poignant and exciting novel about evolving relationships in a time of turmoil. Vasanti, a young woman who has lived a sheltered life in India enters into an arranged marriage with Baba, the son of a Brahmin family whose chief desire is to leave India and study in London, England. At first the two can hardly tolerate each other and their lives seem destined to remain conflicted. The context of war and living through the blitz changes their lives and unexpectedly draws them together. The contrasting settings of the lushness of India and the stark reality of a bleak London in wartime are well drawn and the love story is a captivating read. *IJ*

***Giant*** by Aga Maksimowska. Toronto: Pedlar Press, 2012. Pbk. 226 pages. 978-1897141472

Aga Maksimowska's first novel, *Giant*, successfully portrays historical and political events in Poland of the late 1980s through a child's viewpoint and describes the experiences of a young person's immigration to Canada with emotional resonance and clarity. The novel's coming-of-age narrative, recounted through the often heartbreakingly comic voice of the protagonist, Gosia, will have great appeal to adolescent readers as well as its intended adult audience. 13 year old Gosia is much larger than any of her peers and she sees herself as a misfit. Her parents are divorced; her father works at sea and comes home only twice a year, and her mother, a former schoolteacher in Poland, has gone to work in Canada. When Gosia moves to Toronto with her sister to join her mother, she finds life very hard. Gosia's ironic voice chronicles her shock at finding her mother reduced to being a house-cleaner in Canada, her dislike of the unfamiliar Canadian food and her mortification over her poor English skills at her new school. Maksimowska succeeds in creating a dynamic and emotionally strong protagonist who views her changing world with clarity and humour. *IJ*

***In Calamity's Wake*** by Natalee Caple. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2013. Pbk. 272 pages. 978-1443406703

Martha Jane Canary was better known as Calamity Jane, an American frontierswoman and professional scout. She was one of the few women from the lawless West who could ride a horse and gun down miscreants with the aplomb of a man, but she was also known for her compassion to the sick and needy. Set in the late 1880s, the novel follows Miette, Calamity's abandoned daughter, as she fulfills her promise to her dying father to seek out her mother. Initially reluctant and resentful, and with only a vague understanding of her mother as a soldier, an exhibition shooter at Wild West shows, and a notorious drunk, she learns more about her mother through the people she meets on her quest.

The novel contains two narrative strands: one narrated by Miette, and the other entitled "Martha," a collection of myths, stories and tall tales about Calamity Jane. Caple includes vivid versions of well-known

characters and places including Deadwood, Virginia City, the Black Hills of South Dakota, and Jesse James, Geronimo, and Buffalo Bill. She also plays with the history, reminding us that there are many different stories about Calamity Jane that compete for prominence and for the status of “truth.” *KM*

***Above All Things*** by Tanis Rideout. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2012. Hdbk. 368 pages. 978-0771076350

Blending historical facts with imaginative fiction, this novel describes the harrowing story of George Mallory’s final attempt to climb Mount Everest in 1924, with alternating chapters written from the point of view of his wife at home waiting for news. Though much has already been written about Mallory’s famous climbs, this novel offers a fresh and intriguing perspective on his life and family. The narrative of his legendary final attempt to be the first to conquer Everest is compelling and exciting and offers an intriguing contrast to the enduring love affair with his wife in Cambridge and her frustration at Mallory’s need to return to the elusive mountain that eventually claimed his life. *Above All Things* is a satisfying and insightful read for all ages. *IJ*

### ***Fantasy and Science Fiction***

***Silvered*** by Tanya Huff. New York : DAW Books, 2012. Hdbk. 454 pages. 978-0-75640-743-8

Deserving of its nomination for the 2013 Aurora Award, to be awarded early in October 2013, Huff’s latest novel, a standalone werewolf fantasy, engages the reader in a war between two countries with a kidnapping and rescue mission of mages, werewolves, and politics.

To circumvent a prophecy that an unborn child would be the undoing of the empire, five high-ranking and pregnant women are captured. Their fate rests in the hands of a sixth mage, Mirian Maylin, who although eluding capture has never reached her potential as a mage, and of Tomas Hagen, the younger brother to the werewolf pack leader. Their story of their uneasy collaboration is heightened by the author’s use of alternative points of view from Danika Hagen, one of the captured mages and sister-in-law to Tomas, and Captain Reiter, a soldier set on capturing Mirian.

Fully fleshed characters, humour, action, steampunk elements, werewolves and magic are all expertly woven into this dramatic tale that explores issues that are relevant today for young adults as well as society as a whole. What does it mean to be human and who makes that decision? What does family mean? What is leadership and how is that best demonstrated? *Gdv*

***River of Stars*** by Guy Gavriel Kay. Toronto: Viking, 2013. Hdbk. 639 pages. 978-0-6700-6840-1

In his new foray into historic fantastic saga, Kay returns to the Kitai Empire, approximately 400 years after the time of his earlier epic *Under Heaven*. The events in this latest offering correspond to the Northern Song Dynasty in 12<sup>th</sup> century China, relating the maturation and adventures of Ren Diayan, who is fifteen years old as the novel begins. Diayan wishes to be a warrior and the achievement of this desire involves him, his family and his friends and country in extravagant political machinery and trials and tribulations. His life path also offers him the love of Lin Shan, a songwriter who defies gender boundaries established by society. Explorations of family relationships, both nuclear and larger than life, are also a strong foundation for the action and significance of the novel.

Kay’s strength lies in his full bodied characterizations and his fluent and poetic use of language. It does the novel no harm that several of the characters are poets and songwriters! The novel is a large undertaking, painting a portrait of the era, culture, and the political arena along with its portraits of the two main characters and their intersection with their world as it is, was, and perhaps will be in the near future. There is evidence of a great deal of historical research in the creation of this fantasy world, enriching each and every element of the political and personal crossroads and intrigue and the book should appeal to readers who like to relinquish time and energy to follow the complex plot and plethora of characters to a satisfying conclusion. *GdV*

***I3*** by Kelley Armstrong. Toronto : Ransom House of Canada, 2012. Hdbk. 444 pages, 978-0-30735-761-8

This final entry of the *Women of the Otherworld Series* continues to throw the reader into non-stop action and chaos. Narrated by Savannah but populated with all of the narrators of the entire series, this novel concludes the trilogy of novels within the series focusing on Savannah (*Waking the Witch*, 2010, and *Spell Bound*, 2011) as well as bringing the thirteen volume series to a satisfactory close.

The prologue features Eve, Savannah’s late half-demon mother who is now an angel, before dropping explosively into the action where *Spell Bound* ended. Savannah and her half brother Bryce have escaped from the laboratory explosion with Bryce being desperately ill from experiments conducted within the lab. Encounters with the Supernatural Liberation Movement, the presumably historical Giles de Rais from the fifteenth century, the

inexplicable manifestation of the incorporeal Eve, and the consciousness of the love interest between Savannah and her mentor Adam, are tightly woven in this plot-driven and fast paced conclusion to the overall story arc. Among these enticing but enlarging plot elements are strong characterizations, created carefully over the entire series, and believable relationships that have proven to be important to a legion of readers. A short story featuring series favourites Elena and Clay completes the package.

This is not the novel with which to begin the adventure - there are too many unexplained plot points to be a gratifying experience, but at the same time, it is agreeable to know that a new reader may have the upcoming pleasure of delving into the series, knowing that the conclusion is satisfying and available. The characterization of Savannah as she discovers her powers and identity within the larger realm of the Otherworld would be of particular interest to mature young adult readers who are willing to take this plunge. *GdV*

***Red Planet Blues*** by Robert J. Sawyer. New York: Ace Books, 2013. Hdbk. 368 pages. 978-0425256824

In this genre-blurring novel, intelligent science fiction is written in a film noir style, including hard-nosed private investigator Alex Lomax, corrupt cops, and pretty women. Lomax is the only PI working the mean streets of New Klondike, a town that sprung up on the Martian frontier after Simon Weingarten and Denny O'Reilly discovered fossils on the Red Planet. In a world where almost anything can be synthesized, the remains of alien life are the most valuable of all collectibles and shiploads of desperate treasure hunters stamped to Mars as part of the Great Martian Fossil Rush. Lomax's investigation into a man's disappearance is complicated by "transfer" technology where the mind can be uploaded into an immortal android body. He begins to uncover clues to solving the decades-old murders of Weingarten and O'Reilly and turns up a journal that may lead to their legendary mother lode of Martian fossils.

The story incorporates the Hugo and Nebula Award nominated novella "Identity Theft", published in an anthology in 2005. This material comprises the first ten chapters of the novel and makes the pacing slightly uneven. But overall, this is an entertaining read for fans of either genre. *KM*

***Triggers*** by Robert J. Sawyer. New York: Ace Books, 2012. Pbk. 352 pages. 978-0425256529

In near-future Washington, D.C., the American president is shot by a sniper. While he is in hospital undergoing surgery, an electromagnetic pulse bomb destroys the White House and sends out a pulse that interferes with a memory experiment going on one floor above the operating room. Everyone in proximity to the experiment suddenly has access to someone else's memories, including those of the president. Although some attention is paid to finding the bombers, the book's focus remains largely on the personal lives of the people affected by the experiment and determining who has access to American state secrets.

An underlying theme of this book is about the ability to sustain racism in a world where you can almost "be" another person by inhabiting their memories. There are clear connections to the growth of the internet, and Sawyer's verdict is utopian, as one might expect based on his *WWW* trilogy. *KM*

### ***Love Stories***

***Love and the Mess We're In*** by Stephen Marche. Kentville, NS: Gaspereau Press, 2012. Pbk. 259 pages. 978-1-55447-107-2

Most of this intriguing book revolves around a single, protracted plot moment - the decision to begin an affair taken by the wife and the best friend of a man whose insanity seems to be total and irrevocable. Marche and his publishers play all kinds of typographical games with the story, and readers need to be on the alert for cues as to *how* to read the pages. Section 2, for example, runs from page 62 to page 139, and consists entirely of a conversation that flows back and forth across the gutter of the conjoined pages, with Viv and Clive's thoughts running in parallel columns down the outside of the pages. It takes a bit of getting used to, but it is a potent reminder of how much is normally unsaid, even in the wordiest of narratives. Readers also need to pay heed to a map of New York late in the book; major plot developments appear around its edges and are essential for making sense of the remainder of the story.

That lengthy conversation in section 2 is the preamble to Viv and Clive heading to bed, and there is no denying that a huge percentage of this book involves either foreplay or the sexual act. There is perhaps an element of readerly foreplay in some of the elaborate textual layouts, and it is probably fair to say that some readers will enjoy this game more than others. The emotional core of the story renders an agonizing dilemma and the forward impetus of the plot survives all typographical tricks. If you like experimental fiction, you will probably like this book very much indeed. *MM*



***The Emperor of Paris*** by C.S. Richardson. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2012. Hdbk. 278 pages. 978-0-385-67090-6

The dust jacket and end papers of this intriguing book feature peacock feathers, which is appropriate because the book is feather-light in its story-telling touches. At one level, it is an account of how two lovers meet, a tale with a clear end-point. But the journey to that meeting is long, with many turnings and near misses. Richardson tells the story in a series of vignettes, recreating life in Paris in the first forty years of the twentieth century. Octavio is the son of a baker, and both he and his father are so seriously dyslexic that reading is impossible for them and they turn to story-telling instead. Isabeau is the daughter of a woman who values surfaces and appearances above all else, so when the child turns a pot of scalding soup onto herself and scars her face for life, her mother trains her to hide her face under a scarf. Isabeau turns to different kinds of surfaces, learning to restore the paintings in the Louvre Museum. Isabeau becomes a reader; Octavio becomes a book collector.

Not your everyday story of true love, this novel echoes the skills of a minor character, a street artist who renders everyday details with light pencil strokes. "In the drawing the detail is miniscule: a steady hand at work. One could have plucked individual hairs from the reluctant animal's tail." (208) The same attention to tiny details makes this book live vividly in a series of delicately developed scenes. It is not a page-turner in the conventional sense of the term, but it is a book surprisingly difficult to put down. *MM*

### ***Poetry***

***Under the Keel: Poems*** by Michael Crummey. Toronto: House of Anansi, 2013. Pbk. 101 pages. 978-1-77089-269-9

This collection of poetry covers many stages of life, and features reflections on many different kinds of uncertainty, anticipation, and regret. The first section, "Through a Glass Darkly," presents some very sharply observed comments on being young, being limited by what you don't quite understand but still unable to stop pressing the questions. Other sections address other aspects of life in equally subtle ways. Fine nuances shade the poems about maturity and aging, illuminating questions that readers may be only half-aware of having wondered about themselves. This is a book that will repay careful reading and re-reading. *MM*

***A Complete Encyclopedia of Different Types of People*** by Gabe Foreman. Toronto: Coach House Books, 2011. Pbk. 91 pages. 978-1-55245-244-8

A standard phrase for a review is that a publication repays careful reading. This book of poems absolutely requires that careful reading. For starters, it is important to read the title of each poem or prose piece. In the second place, this book is a meditation on the role of the alphabet, among other things, and the order of the pieces is both random and convincing. Lines and, at least once, a whole poem are repeated; there are also many cross-references. Readers must stay alert at all times.

Listing just the "A" section will give some sense of the range: Accidents, Adulterers, Amateurs, Ambulance Chasers, Androids, Animal Lovers, Ankle-Biters, and Armchair Psychologists. The intriguing randomness of life is established for our admiration and skepticism, poem by poem. *MM*

### ***Mystery***

***Until the Night*** by Giles Blunt. Toronto: Random House Canada, 2012. Hdbk. 300 pages. 978-0-679-31435-6

The latest instalment in Blunt's long-running mystery series featuring flawed detective John Cardinal is set, as usual, in Algonquin Bay in northern Ontario. Even more than past novels in this excellent sequence, ***Until the Night*** emphasizes its northern roots; hypothermia is one of the enemies in this book, and a parallel narrative in the book is actually set in the high Arctic. As usual, Blunt is vivid on the subjects of winter and cold, and the many pragmatic ways people find of dealing with them.

In this well-crafted novel, in addition to developing a gripping plot about a serial killer who leaves his victims to freeze to death, Blunt extends the relationship between the widowed Cardinal and his police colleague, Lise Delorme. From the onset of the series, Cardinal has always been an intriguing and contradictory character. In this book, the character of Delorme is fleshed out (in literal as metaphorical terms). The result is a highly satisfying read. *MM*