

Contemporary Adult Canadian Titles with Appeal for Strong Teen Readers
Margaret Mackey
with
Ingrid Johnston, Heather Ganshorn, and Gail de Vos

The appearance of this column in 2015 marks both an anniversary and a turning point. As usual, we draw readers' attention to the broad range of recently published Canadian material with the potential to appeal to strong teen readers. This column is the twentieth we have produced, and it owes its longevity to our conviction that teenagers enjoy and benefit from challenging themselves with samples of adult reading. In the past year we have seen considerable controversy over the question of whether adults "should" be reading young adult literature; while we certainly do not dismiss the merits and sophistication of much young adult material, we also think that the teenage years are a time when readers gain great rewards when they stretch themselves to encounter books that were not originally written with them in mind.

The mandate we have developed for ourselves is to review books with a focus on content that may appeal to teenage readers. We do not censor for language or violence or, indeed, for complexity; we assume that a strong teen reader is perfectly capable of laying aside a book that does not appeal for these reasons or any other.

Twenty years is a long time for a small team to sustain such a challenging and time-consuming venture as this column, and the anniversary also presents a moment for change. Starting next year, Gail Sidonie Sobat will take over the main job of organizing this column. Many current reviewers will continue to participate.

Gail Sidonie Sobat completed a Master's degree in English at the University of Alberta in Children's Literature, specializing in fantasy. She is also a multi-award-winning teacher and author, with eleven books for children, teens and adults, and a number of educational and academic articles. Gail is the creator/coordinator of YouthWrite®, camps for kids who love to write...just about anything!© (now in its 20th year), an international presenter, an instructor in the professional writing program at MacEwan University, a past adjunct professor in the Faculty of Education at U of A, a member of the Writers' Union of Canada Curriculum Task Force Committee and one of two writers in residence with the Metro Edmonton Federation of Libraries, 2015.

For some years now, the annual column has been compiled into a master list comprising all previous columns, available online on Margaret Mackey's website at <https://drive.google.com/a/uAlberta.ca/file/d/0BxYXRie3HCUJelgwSWtPNGExMzg/view>. Over the years, of course, this complete list has grown in length and unwieldiness, and we are taking the moment of the twentieth anniversary to start fresh. This current column will be added into the master list and appear in the spring of 2016 in the usual way. Any further compilations will begin with the 2016 column.

As I step down from the position of ring-master of this column, I would like to thank every reviewer who has participated in it over the past two decades. The reading occurs over the whole year, but the column really falls into place over each summer, and it is always a marvel to me to see it take shape, full of enticing invitations for reading pleasure. The reviewers are the heart of this enterprise and we all owe them a debt for their hard work.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the graduate students in the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Alberta, who have taken on the annual challenge of compiling the master list - an arduous task whose only reward is the exposure to a stimulating set of reading suggestions.

I would also like to thank the editors of Resource Links for their stalwart support over the years. We certainly couldn't have done it without you. Thanks also to our readers over this long period of time.

I am excited to welcome Gail to her new role; I know she will bring fresh insight and energy to the task, and I know she will enjoy the same backing and encouragement from the journal as we have been pleased to experience over this long era. I'll be back next year as a reviewer - meanwhile enjoy the feast of lively titles that the twentieth column has to offer.

MM

A Step Outside of Normal

The Back of the Turtle by Thomas King. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2014. Hardback. 528 pages. 978-1-443-4316-20

Thomas King's latest novel is a lament on the effects of environmental disasters on Aboriginal people's lives but is narrated with King's characteristic wit and humour. The plot is focalized through two contrasting characters. Dr Gabriel Quinn is a renowned Aboriginal biologist who helped develop a fertilizer intended to enhance agricultural productivity but instead destroyed everything it touched, and Dorian Asher is the CEO of the biochemical company where Quinn worked.

The novel opens with Quinn trying to drown himself in the river at the Smoke River reserve that was devastated by the

fertilizer. His suicide attempt is thwarted when he tries to rescue a group of drowning people falling from the sky who then disappear. This event foreshadows Quinn's attempts to make amends for the damage he has caused in his interaction with people remaining on the reserve - in particular with Mara, an indigenous artist, and Nicolas, the humorous character who runs the local hot springs.

In alternating chapters, we are introduced to Dorian Asher, whose lavish lifestyle and uncaring attitude to the effects of the fertilizer poison caused by his company provide a telling contrast to Gabriel Quinn's remorse. Dorian is almost a one-dimensional character with no redeeming features, but King brings him alive through black humour and a depiction of corporate greed that resonates with stories in the news related to the apathy shown by some large corporations about environmental crises.

King's book is long and sometimes overly descriptive but his character depictions are fascinating and his novel succeeds in highlighting some of the current environmental challenges we face in Canada. *IJ*

The Peripheral by William Gibson. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2014. Hardback. 485 pages. 978-0-399-15844-5

Fans of William Gibson appreciate that he expects his readers to apply their intelligence to his hard-hitting visions of the future. Even the most hardcore enthusiasts, however, may find the first fifty pages of ***The Peripheral*** to be a significant challenge. From the opening sentence ("They didn't think Flynne's brother had PTSD, but that sometimes the haptics glitched him"), Gibson clearly expects his readers to hit the ground running. In short alternating chapters, told from the point of view of protagonists in different worlds (sometimes conveyed through the perspectives of camera operators or avatars), Gibson sets up a complex and demanding story.

Persevering is worth it, though by page 50 some readers may be beginning to wonder! Some early re-reading will probably help sort out the substantial set of characters, and as the parameters of the alternating settings begin to settle down, it becomes clear that Gibson is establishing the basis of a compelling plot. As usual, his worlds glance off our own, supplying glimpses of potential futures. In this book, two different vistas of the future are on offer. By means of time-travelling through avatars (the peripherals of the title), inhabitants of the far future can move into the world of the near future - but by interfering with the history of that world, they close it off to the possibility of developing and it becomes what is known as a "stub" (another meaning for the idea of "peripheral"). Flynne and her family and friends inhabit the near future, a depressing vision of today's world gone further awry. Wilf lives in the more remote future, an era that more closely approximates the stereotype of "futuristic." Flynne accidentally witnesses an event of considerable importance to Wilf's world, and the plot is triggered. The story is absorbing and complex, well worth the initial investment of time and attention. *MM*

The Hunger of the Wolf by Stephen Marche. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2015. Hardback. 253 pages. 978-1-44342-287-1

The Wylies are among the very richest people in the world. The secret of their ruthlessness lies in the wilderness of northern Alberta, where, at the start of this novel, Ben Wylie is found dead, naked in the snow.

Jamie Cabot belongs to the family that takes care of the Wylies' Alberta cottage. But he is not interested in the wilderness; his heart and ambitions are set on New York, and he is willing to use whatever he can discover of the Wylie family secret to help him stay there.

So far, this very sketchy plot outline holds the potential to develop into a conventional story of greed and yearning. But the Wylie family secret explodes the conventions of genre, and this novel actually merges realistic and fairy tale norms to stunning effect. Told across several generations, the story explores relations between fathers and sons, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, all heightened by means of a mythological framing that makes perfectly good sense in the context of a story of the uber-rich. Absorbing and intriguing, it captivates on the level of page and chapter and lingers in the mind after the reading has ended. A highly compelling and thought-provoking story, contemporary and ageless at one and the same time. *MM*

Station Eleven by Emily St. John Mandel. HarperCollins, 2014. Hardback. 352 pages. 978-1-44343-486-7

In the first chapter of this two-tiered novel, Arthur Leander, a Shakespearean actor, succumbs to a massive heart attack onstage during a performance of King Lear. Jeevan Chaudhary, an apprentice paramedic in the audience that evening, tries to save him but to no avail and Leander is the last celebrity to fall before the Georgia Flu wipes out 99% of the world's population. The story then moves twenty years into the future, following Kirsten Raymonde, a child actress and witness of Leander's spectacular death. She remembers very little of the actual death but has retained a fascination with the actor and the stranger

who was for her that evening, the enigmatic Chaudhary. She still treasures the fact that Leander had given her two issues of a comic book, *Station Eleven*, that features a physicist who lives on a space station after escaping an alien conquest of the planet and was created by Arthur Leander's first wife, Miranda. It is this comic book that becomes the talisman of the two societies, pre and post apocalyptic.

The adult Kirsten is a member of a traveling musical and acting troupe who visits the remaining small towns that had, one way or another, survived the collapse after the Georgia Flu epidemic. As they leave one dangerous settlement the troupe discovers that they have acquired a stowaway, a twelve-year-old child bride, desperately sought after by a vengeful prophet in that community.

The slower pace of this nonlinear science fiction mystery novel is reflective of the weight of the drama that is, and has, unfolded in the present and flashbacks to the twenty years previously. The characters are well formed, rounded and totally believable and relatable. The two story arcs eventually connect, linked by Arthur Leander, and the characters he touched both before and after his dramatic heart attack. This is also a novel that explores our technical lives and our contemporary reliance upon technologies and this element is one of the most noteworthy reasons for recommending the novel to sophisticated young adult readers. The novel also explores nostalgia, memory, and the role of art in community and for the salvation of individuals. There has been wide acclaim for the novel: it was awarded the *Arthur C. Clarke Award*, the most prestigious award for science fiction in Great Britain, and nominated for the *National Book Award*; it was also a finalist for both the *PEN/Faulkner Award*, and the *Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction*. *GdV*

The Deep by Nick Cutter. New York: Gallery Books, 2015. Hardback. 400 pages. 978-1-47671-773-9.

Craig Davidson, writing under the pseudonym Nick Cutter, follows up last year's bestselling horror novel *The Troop* with another creepy adventure. This one is set deep beneath the ocean in what appears to be the near future. Humanity has been hit by an epidemic that people call the 'Gets, in which the afflicted slowly forget everything - little things at first, but eventually they lose all memories and then die once they forget to keep breathing. There is no cure, but researchers have found something promising eight miles beneath the surface of the ocean off the coast of Vietnam. The mysterious substance is called ambrosia, and it appears to cure everything. Unfortunately, the research team working on the project has stopped communicating with their colleagues on the surface. The story is told from the perspective of Luke, a middle-aged veterinarian with a tragic past. He is recruited to go down to the undersea research station because one of the research team's members is his brilliant but possibly psychopathic brother. What he finds down there is not a miracle cure, but a horror that preys gradually and insidiously on the minds of those who study it. Highly recommended for fans of Stephen King, to whom Cutter is often compared. *HG*

Youth and Age

Etta and Otto and Russell and James by Emma Hooper. Toronto: Hamish Hamilton, 2015. Hardback. 305 pages. 978-0-670-06774-9.

Etta is nearly eighty-three and struggling with dementia when she decides that it is time she saw the ocean. Leaving the truck for her equally elderly husband, Otto, she sets out on foot to walk to the Atlantic from Saskatchewan. For much of her quest, her only company is a talking coyote, James. Otto stays at home and takes up an unlikely art form. Russell sets out to find her but is persuaded to go on his own quest.

In addition to being very old, Etta and Otto are also young and in love. Russell is Otto's longtime friend and also in love with Etta, both as a young man and also as an octogenarian.

The talking coyote introduces an explicit element of magic realism to this story, but the way that the young characters exist inside the older ones is not fanciful at all. Etta sometimes struggles with memories of today but her recollections of the past are clear. The rhythms of this poetic story establish that balance between the aged and the youthful incarnations of the characters in ways that are both delicately nuanced and highly intriguing. The young ones do not ever imagine themselves as old, but the elderly fold their youthful selves into their whole being.

The ambiguity of this book is memorable and haunting. *MM*

Sweetland by Michael Crummey. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2014. Hardback. 318 pages. 978-0-385-66316-8

By some measures, this book does not qualify for an appearance in this column. Its hero is a man in late middle age, the one condition that normally rules a book out of consideration for these pages. In this rich and engrossing story, however, Michael Crummey presents the life and last days of a whole community, and supplies many details from the point of view of a much younger Moses Sweetland. The depth of that community perspective and the detail of the survival story that constitutes the

second half of the novel illuminate a book of potential interest to all ages.

“Sweetland” is the name of the main character of this book, of the community in which he lives, and of the little island on which that community is located, off the south coast of Newfoundland. Sweetland the outpost is under pressure from the Newfoundland government to disappear, as part of the major social and economic thrust to close down the most remote outposts and bring isolated citizens closer to sources of education and health care. The condition of closing this particular community is that every single resident must agree, and Moses Sweetland is the last holdout.

Crummey brings his little outpost to life in this absorbing story. The isolation and frequently grim weather form part of the picture, but in the early days of the novel when the community is still active, the Internet reduces that sense of being separated from the rest of the world, and the citizens travel back and forth with relative ease. As various inhabitants depart and the services decline accordingly, the sense of isolation becomes much more pervasive. How would it feel to be the only human being in your world? Crummey provides a very persuasive answer to that question. *MM*

Girl Runner by Carrie Snyder. Toronto: Anansi, 2014. Hardback. 376 pages. 978-1-77089-432-7.

In the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics, women were allowed to compete in track and field for the first time. Canada was represented in this event by the “matchless six,” who took home several medals and became Canadian celebrities. Snyder explores this story with her tale of Aganetha Smart (a fictional character, only loosely based on the real-life athletes). Now 104, Aggie languishes in a nursing home, having outlived everyone she once knew. She’s visited by two university students interested in making a documentary about her groundbreaking athletic career. Aggie’s story unfolds in a series of flashbacks as she recalls her rural Ontario childhood, her move to Toronto in her teens, her subsequent discovery by the Olympic coach, and her Olympic experience. The focus is really more on the character’s life experiences than her sporting career; she is torn between family responsibilities, conventional expectations of girls, and her dreams of sporting glory. Snyder’s debut novel brings this little-known period of Canadian sports history to vivid life. *HG*

Coming of Age

The Opening Sky by Joan Thomas. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2014. Hardback. 368 pages. 978-0-77108-392-0.

Thomas’ latest novel chronicles a turbulent year in the life of a Winnipeg family. Sylvie Phimister is in her second year of university in Winnipeg, studying botany. In her spare time, she’s involved in environmental activism. Her parents, Liz and Aiden, appear to be happily settled into successful careers; Liz runs a sexual health education centre and Aiden has a counselling practice with several regular clients. Yet there’s tension in the family, particularly between Sylvie and her mother, and references to a tragic event that occurred during a long-ago mother-daughter road trip. When Sylvie discovers she’s five months pregnant, these tensions come to a head. Sylvie moves home late in her pregnancy, but struggles as a young mother who had planned to pull away from her parents and instead is flung back into a state of dependence on them. This is a poignant and believable portrait of a young woman and her family facing some difficult decisions, and the ending doesn’t come wrapped up in a tidy resolution. *HG*

For Today I Am a Boy by Kim Fu. Toronto: HarperCollins Canada, 2014. Hardback. 256 pages. 978-1-44341-264-3.

A timely book for this year, when the struggles of transgender people have been in the news more than ever before. Peter is the longed-for only son in a Chinese-Canadian family that also contains three daughters. Growing up in small-town Ontario around the 1980s or 1990s, Peter is clearly transgender from an early age, but in the years just before the Internet, he doesn’t have the means to find out more, or even the language to describe what he feels his true identity to be. The novel covers his childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood as he grapples with his identity. It also provides a sense of how quickly things are changing. Around age 30, Peter meets a 19-year-old transgender man in Montreal, who was born a girl but was supported from early childhood in developing his identity as a boy. The contrast between the younger, bolder, more activist generation and Peter’s own traditional upbringing, which he is unable to fully shed, is sensitively drawn. This is a bittersweet coming-of-age story. *HG*

His Whole Life by Elizabeth Hay. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2015. Hardback. 384 pages. 978-0771038594.

Jim has an American father and a Canadian mother. He spends most of his year in New York City, but his summers in rural Ontario, close to the Quebec border. We meet him first at the age of ten, and follow his life closely for a few years in the early part of the 1990s.

The slow and sleepy days of summer set the pace for much of this book, though a surprising amount of incident is also packed into its leisurely pages. Jim’s mother, Nan, yearns for the emptiness of Canada, and frets over the threat of the upcoming Quebec referendum. His father, George, hates the wilderness and is only content in the crowded streets of New York. This kind of disagreement does not lead to a dispute that can readily be solved by compromise, and the story invokes many

other forms of divisiveness, up to and including the referendum itself. Jim tries to establish his own footing in the uneasy balance between his mother and his father. His older half-brother has set up his own form of estrangement, leaving the family for a hard-line Christian community. His mother's dear friend, Lulu, creates strife all around her; although Nan loves her, George hates her, and her own brother is hostile. The title of the book is itself ironic; a "whole life" is presented as full of faultlines and differences that prove just about impossible to surmount.

And yet, the novel itself is an engaging and contemplative read. Hay invokes the nature of backwoods Ontario with great affection and care. Her account of the return to the city is also compelling. The result is a subtle and powerful story. *MM*

Where I Belong: Small Town to Great Big Sea by Alan Doyle. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2014. Hardback. 314 pages. 978-0-385-68036-3

Petty Harbour, Newfoundland, as its name suggests is not a very big place. In this small fishing village, just outside St. John's, Alan Doyle was born in 1969. Despite the fact that city life was really not very far away, the young Alan lived a life that sounds deprived to the point of being exotic to many young Canadians today, not all that many years later.

With no bathroom in their house, they would bathe my sister Kim and themselves with water that Dad would retrieve from the river behind our house and heat on the stove. An old plastic beef bucket with a handmade seat made a fine toilet, and the river behind our house served as a septic line that carried the effluent away into the ocean (p.15)

Even when a bathroom was finally installed by the mid-1970s, the pipes froze for several months in winter.

Yet Doyle describes a home that seems to have been happy most of the time. Certainly it was lively, with four children eventually, and a gaggle of other kids in the outport to play with. Doyle's childhood coincided with the last flourishing of the cod fishery before the 1992 moratorium; and Petty Harbour boys aged between 10 and 14 made money from cutting the tongues out of the daily catch of codfish.

These and other pastimes, some more lucrative than others, filled a busy childhood, and provided a repertoire of experiences that would feed into Doyle's adult success as a member of *Great Big Sea*, the wildly popular Newfoundland folk rock band. His story is lively, often raucous, and very easy to read. *MM*

The Eye of the Day by Dennison Smith. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2014. Paperback. 275 pages. 978-1-44341-187-5

This is a fascinating coming-of-age story of Aubrey, a boy from a privileged New England family and his relationship with Amos, a disfigured handyman. The story begins in the 1930s and follows the characters to the end of World War Two. The book starts with a bang - literally - as a train explodes in Vermont cottage country where Aubrey is spending the summer with his family. The explosion brings the two together in unlikely ways, and the book follows their lives and their episodic meetings over the next decades.

Dennison writes in a vivid and poetic style that quickly conjures up an intimate portrait of these two diverse and complex characters. The plot is fast-moving, the setting moves from Vermont to the Alberta oil fields, to Havana and then the Italian Alps, and the story covers an interesting historical period from peacetime to war. It should have appeal to a range of readers. *IJ*

World Events

Who By Fire by Fred Stenson. Toronto: Doubleday, 2014. Hardback. 368 pages. 978-0-38566-879-8.

Fred Stenson tackles some complex and timely issues in this compulsively readable novel, which explores the impact of the oil and gas industry on its neighbours and its workers. In the early 1960s, Tom and Ella Ryder and their three children are an ordinary farm family in southern Alberta. Their lives are shattered when a large corporation builds a sour gas plant next to their farm. Soon the farm is subjected to the regular drift of poisonous gas. Calves and piglets begin to die, and the Ryders' five-year-old son, Billy, is stricken by nosebleeds, vomiting and anemia. The Ryders' marriage falters as Ella is reluctant to leave the farm inherited from her parents, while Tom becomes obsessed with the futile pursuit of a lawsuit against the gas company. Decades later, their son Bill is an engineer at an oil sands upgrader near Fort McMurray. Bill is now nearing retirement, with two failed marriages behind him. When he's not working, he fills his empty hours feeding his gambling addiction. Eventually, his attraction to a local aboriginal woman pushes him to investigate his industry's environmental impacts, forcing him to face the contradictions of the industry that has provided his livelihood and destroyed his parents' way of life. *HG*

The Betrayers by David Bezmozgis. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2014. Hardback. 225 pages. 978-1-44340-97.

Bezmozgis's latest novel is a compelling thriller focused on one day in the life of Baruch Kotler, a former Israeli minister whose affair with a much younger mistress has forced his resignation. The couple has fled Israel and Kotler has chosen to return to Crimea, the nation that sent him to the gulag years before. When he finds their hotel reservation has been lost, Kotler agrees to move to a small boarding house owned by a woman who explains she is married to a Jewish man. Here, Kotler revisits his past and encounters the man who betrayed him to the Soviet authorities years before. The book is written in elegant

prose and offers readers a dramatic story that raises difficult moral questions. *IJ*

The Evening Chorus by Helen Humphries. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2015. Hardback. 304 pages. 978-1-443-41548-4.

Helen Humphries excels in producing short novels that capture the imagination and engage readers with her sharp eye for character and setting and her elegant style of writing. Her latest book ***The Evening Chorus*** is no exception. At first glance the novel may appear to be centred on bird watching; much of the early part of the book does focus on a study of redstarts carried out by James Hunter, an RAF pilot shot down and imprisoned in a German Prisoner of War camp in 1940. But the book is really a study of relationships, loss and redemption. James spends much of his time writing to his newly-married wife, Rose, explaining his passion for the birds. But he receives little response. James's hobby does, however, draw the attention of the camp Kommandant, who proves unexpectedly supportive of his prisoner's newfound hobby. The novel then moves to a period after the war, when it becomes clear that James's wife, Rose, does not share his passion for birds; in fact, the two have little in common and their relationship crumbles. When James's sister, Enid, is bombed out in London and comes to stay with Rose, the two women develop an unexpected bond of friendship that moves the plot forward in new directions. This is an intriguing and insightful book that will please many readers. *IJ*

Poetry

The Wrong Cat by Lorna Crozier. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2015. Paperback. 74 pages. 978-0-7710-2391-0.

Like the rest of Crozier's writing, this book speaks to readers of all ages. To take one extreme example, the poem "Sixty-six winters" might seem by its title to be addressed to those heading into seniorhood, but it turns out to be a poem about a prairie road in wintertime, a subject that is not age-specific:

Snow sparks

underfoot, everything's high voltage.

Wind comes at you from four directions,

the sound entirely its own, no leaves to rattle,

nothing on the line, no opening unclosed. (p.14)

She continues, "Your hips can barely carry you, too heavy/with the past" but a prairie wind will scour that feeling out of almost anyone.

The cat is only one of many animals and birds - especially birds - featuring in this collection of short, sharp poems. A 12-page sequence, "Man from Elsewhere," (30-41) delves into the complexity of marriage: the ongoing relationship, the sex, the years, the joys and sorrows. She is particularly good at drawing the contrast between the ongoing build-up of years of contact and the continuing in-the-minute pleasures of a sexual relationship. A book with many delights. *MM*

Brickle, Nish, and Knobbly: A Newfoundland Treasury of Terms for Ice and Snow by Marlene Creates. Portugal Cove-St. Phillips, NL: Boulder Publications, 2015. Hardback. 152 pages. 978-1-927-99-65-0.

The oddity of this book's title suggests that it might be of interest mainly to hardcore aficionados of Newfoundland's bountiful folklore. There is an element of specialization about it, to be sure. But this book is far more universal than such a description would suggest. Anyone who lives through an extended winter season (that is, most Canadians) can enjoy and benefit from Creates' long poem, based on Newfoundland's extraordinary vocabulary for winter phenomena, and marvel at her compelling photographs of winter in a single place (this illustrated poem is also available in video format).

Creates, documenting the winter of 2012-2013 at Blast Hole Pond River, just outside of St. John's, observes: "*The seasonal phenomena are observed and recorded by means of over 50 named varieties of ice, snow, and winter weather. These terms are precise, practical, evocative, sonic, and lyrical. And knowing them helps us actually see different phenomena, instead of winter being just a cold, white blur.*" (p.7)

The delicacy and evocativeness of the language of ice and snow is extraordinary, and this book and its video predecessor have the potential to illuminate our thinking about an inescapable element of many Canadians' lives. *MM*

Trying Again to Stop Time by Jalal Barzanji. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2015. Trans. S.A. Salih. Paperback. 124 pages. 978-1-77212-043-1.

Barzanji is a Kurdish poet who now lives in Edmonton. His poems address important questions about home and exile, love and loss, and finding a balance between knowing who you are and where you come from and attempting to speak in more universal ways. For example, in his poem *The Pocket*, he mixes the very ordinary with the politically specific:

Sometimes,

it's a knife that people pull out of their pockets

sometimes,

*it's a flower
sometimes,
it's a cigarette
sometimes,
it's just a thread*

....

*And sometimes this:
a malicious report against a friend*

....

*Sometimes,
it's their second country's passport that people pull out,
some kissing it,
others just looking at it. (pp.18-19)*

Some readers of these poems will relish a potent sense of recognition of their own divided lives; others will find illumination of hard decisions of a kind unknown in their own more fortunate existences. Either way, the book opens windows into the kinds of complex personal and political backstories that feature in the lives of many new Canadians. It is beautifully produced and memorable in its painful ambivalence. *MM*

Mysteries and Thrillers

Harmless by James Grainger. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2015. Paperback. 272 pages. 978-0-7710-3670-9.

This psychological thriller will please readers who enjoy edge-of-the-seat suspense and a plot that twists and turns to a surprise ending. The novel's protagonist, Joseph, is a divorced online columnist struggling to maintain a relationship with his teenage daughter, Franny. The two are at a weekend retreat in the countryside - a reunion of friends from Joseph's past. The retreat is hosted by Jane, Joseph's former lover, and her current husband, Alex, with their teenage daughter, Rebecca. The first evening of the weekend disintegrates into a drunken world of reminiscences, macho swaggering, rivalry and misguided passion, with undercurrents of a world of violence lurking in the woods at the edge of the property. When Franny and Rebecca appear to be missing, the tension rises. The two fathers insist on heading into the woods to look for their daughters; Alex, a former soldier, is armed with a gun and Joseph with a borrowed knife. From there, the novel becomes a harrowing series of mishaps and violent encounters, with Joseph and Alex acting out their fears about the girls' fate and their distrust of each other.

Harmless is Grainger's first full-length novel. With its fast-paced action and its exploration of current issues, male angst and broken relationships, the book has potential to be a popular read. *IJ*

Abattoir Blues by Peter Robinson. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2015. Paperback. 367 pages. 978-0-7710-7644-2.

This latest mystery novel featuring Inspector Banks is set in rural Yorkshire, where the minor case of a missing tractor leads to a tense series of crimes. Bloodstains are found in a disused airplane hanger, two young men disappear under mysterious circumstances, a caravan is burned to the ground, and body parts show up in a crashed delivery truck. Alan Banks and his team of investigators struggle to make sense of what is happening. With his characteristic careful plotting and his development of interesting Yorkshire characters, Robinson offers readers another suspenseful and entertaining mystery novel. *IJ*

Walt by Russell Wangersky. Toronto: Spiderline (House of Anansi), 2014. Paperback. 315 pages. 978-1-77089-467-9.

This psychological thriller will keep many readers turning pages - but Wangersky's elegant prose will simultaneously cause many readers to linger in appreciation. Walt is a supermarket janitor who collects old grocery lists that have been discarded by the store's customers - a habit many readers will instantly pledge to reform, because Walt and Wangersky make surprisingly sinister use of the customers' castaway memos. The suspense mounts as Walt curates his collection of discards with loving - and frightening - attention. Occasionally the point of view of another character is permitted to perforate Walt's claustrophobic perspective, but this change in viewpoint does not necessarily lighten the overwhelming sense of doom. Readers who like their books to offer chills in an intelligent way will greatly enjoy ***Walt***. *MM*

The Long Way Home by Louise Penny. New York: Minotaur Books, 2014. Hardback. 373 pages. 978-1-250-02206-6.

Louise Penny's detective books, featuring Chief Inspector Armand Gamache, have won numerous awards and gained a dedicated readership. In her latest novel, Gamache, now retired, partners with his son-in-law, detective Jean-Guy Beauvoir, to solve the mysterious disappearance of his neighbour's artist husband, Peter. The plot unfolds slowly as Penny offers readers details of Peter's past recognition as a Quebec painter and his increasing jealousy as he sees his wife, Clara, becoming even more famous as an avant-garde painter. The second part of the book moves more quickly, as Gamache, Beauvoir, Clara and a

friend travel into remote areas of the Quebec landscape to solve the mystery of Peter's disappearance. They unravel a complex plot that includes betrayal, asbestos poisoning, and a shocking reversal of their expectations about what happened to Peter. Old and new fans of Louise Penny's novels will not be disappointed. *IJ*

Family Life

Adult Onset by Anne-Marie Macdonald. Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2014. Hardback. 400 pages. 978-0-345-80827-1.

This witty and acerbic novel focuses on six days in the life of Mary Rose, who is married to her female partner, Hilary, and raising two young children. Mary Rose has taken a break from her successful writing career to stay at home with the children while Hilary is away at work. All Mary Rose's previous ideas about parenting have vanished as she struggles through the day-to-day challenges of dealing with the children and the tedium of housework. This psychological profile of Mary Rose is frank and very funny. As the novel progresses we also learn more about her past and a childhood illness as we meet her scatterbrained and eccentric mother who suffered her own challenges parenting.

Ann-Marie Macdonald's first two popular books, *Fall on Your Knees* and *The Way the Crow Flies*, were both award winners. Her writing in *Adult Onset*, though very different from these in scope and tone, is engaging and complex and the novel is a compelling read. *IJ*

River Music by Mary Soderstrom. Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2015. Paperback. 276 pages. 978-1-77086-415-3.

This book recounts the price of an artistic life as played out (literally as well as figuratively!) by Gloria - daughter, granddaughter, lover, wife, mother, grandmother, and also pianist. From an early age, Gloria is determined to make a life as a concert pianist, an ambition that sweeps all the rest of her life into second place. She is poor, she is female, and she is naive, at least to begin with.

The novel is not perfect; too much is told instead of shown, and the title metaphor of "river of music" is overdone. But it tells an interesting story and makes appealing use of a real-life Canadian composer, Claude Vivier (a performance of a pivotal piece of music in the book, Vivier's *Lonely Child* can be seen on YouTube). Gloria achieves some of her artistic triumphs through denying the importance of her private feelings; other accomplishments ride on the use she makes of those around her in a position to help. At the same time, she feels uneasiness about whether she is truly great after all. The questions raised by these elements of the book are the most interesting thing about it, but it is an absorbing read all the same. *MM*

Short Stories

Knife Fight and Other Struggles by David Nickle. Vancouver: Raincoast, 2015. Paperback. 224 pages. 978-1-77148-304-9.

While reviewers often compare David Nickle to Stephen King, this collection of short stories is more creepy than blood-curdling; readers might be reminded more of *The Twilight Zone*. The stories range from traditional horror (exorcisms, cultish religious practices) to science fiction (cryogenically frozen space colonists) to just outright weird (the girl with eyeballs all over her body). Fans of horror, sci-fi and speculative fiction will find lots to enjoy here. *HG*