

BOOK REVIEWS

Randy Boyagoda, *Original Prin*
Windsor: Biblioasis, 2018
223 pages, \$19.95, ISBN 9781771962452

In a recent interview, Randy Boyagoda commented that *Original Prin* is “the first of [his] novels where ethnic identity . . . is not one of the driving features. It’s part of the novel.” Boyagoda’s comment raises the fundamental questions at the heart of this sprawling, compelling, domestic-yet-surreal satire: how do we manage to create ourselves out of disparate parts, and whose job is it to decide anyway? Following up on Boyagoda’s Giller Prize nominee *Governor of the Northern Province* (2006) and New York Times Editors’ Choice *Beggar’s Feast* (2011), *Original Prin* focuses on the events and ideologies that people use to define themselves and how quickly these forces can become overwhelming when one tries to make something out of the chaos.

After a near brush with his own mortality, the titular Prin fashions himself as a sort of wannabe saint, trying to find what God wants of him in the stresses and temptations that build as he is thrust into the role of representative for his university in the recently war-torn nation of Dragomans. Reminiscent of the flailing Arthur in Douglas Adams’ *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (1979), Prin is a figure desperately trying to make sense of the relentlessness of existence, and he is as critical of the world around him as he is of himself. While Prin ridicules the crude bluntness of a loud working-class family at the zoo, for example, he sees that his own upper-class haughtiness keeps him from clearly expressing his fears to his loved ones as easily as they do. This pervasive self-awareness reveals Prin’s own failings to be universal and asks readers to judge whether they themselves are as guilty of ignorance as the characters they critique. Prin is judgmental, self-conscious, and scared; if that’s not relatable, I don’t know what is.

In *Original Prin*, Boyagoda turns a joyfully misanthropic lens on the

complexities of a world defined by irreconcilable oppositions. He lampoons the unspoken pretensions that hold up culture, criticizing the often implicit assumptions of superiority by casting their instability in a clear light, and he seems to have something to say about nearly every institution, as the haughtiness of academic institutions crumbles under the weight of financial obligation (albeit to some Graeco-Latin grumbling) and political leaders realize that a national identity is only as strong as its search-engine-optimized hashtag. Though occasionally suffering for this broad scope (a scene comes to mind in which an Alex Jones archetype being let down by a bravado-less veteran is undercut by equally prototypical art school dropouts failing to make a political statement within the space of a single chapter), the pace is mediated by the painfully self-aware protagonist's idiosyncratic and radically uncertain inner monologue.

The novel's greatest success is its compassionate meditation on the humanity of belief. Moving beyond the religious angle addressed in the relationship between the hyperbolically Catholic Prin and his antagonistically atheistic ex, Wende, belief is made something more foundational. It is the underlying way each individual seeks definition, forging identities on the strength of their convictions in a world that is dead set on denying any stability. Far from concrete, faith is shown to be something both malleable and fragile—a meagre and insubstantial glue that the characters are forced to adapt and reapply as it is endlessly pushed. As the novel shifts from an initial campy absurdity to an uneasy, inevitable darkness, we see how the faltering of faith exposes in everyone a raw and vulnerable human core; stripped of such reassuring rigidity, all that remains is brittle emotion and the terrifying uncertainty of what, if anything, constitutes the truth of an individual. With every misstep and uncertainty, Prin—the “Holy Romantic” who seeks God and His message for him in every action—is forced to face the reality of his ideology being as fallible and flawed as the world from which he struggles to pull guidance. He is also forced to confront the potential of an uncaring universe, as he sees his professional integrity reduced to the battleground of a real estate bidding war, his sacred monuments worn down into tourist traps, and his own relationship, without giving any spoilers, subjected to a choice beyond intellection. Through all of this, he is haunted by the question “What does God believe about you?” Heartbreaking and humanizing, *Original Prin* carefully and powerfully highlights how easily we confuse belief and self and what becomes of us when the identity we construct is chal-

lenged.

Original Prin is a sharp and thoughtful examination of the patchwork collection of thoughts, ideals, and flaws that constitutes human nature. Shifting effortlessly from sharp social critique to a delicate and intimate narrative of personal faith, Boyagoda manages to capture the absurdity and complexity of navigating a society seemingly defined by adversarial extremes. Though the novel can at times appear messy for the sheer volume of seemingly disparate events, these chaotic threads are well-managed by, and in many ways reflective of, the radically uncertain, anxious, and stirringly human central character. Blithe silliness, occasional surreality, and moments of shocking darkness come together into something as blackly humorous as it is honest. Prin wants to know what God believes of him, and it is a pleasure to seek the answer to that question with him.

—Justin Moir, Dalhousie University

Sean Howard, *Ghost Estates*

Kentville, NS: Gaspereau Press, 2018

80 pages, \$19.95, ISBN 9781554471898

What is the poet's task? Inspired by a lunchtime lecture on the topic of "Orpheus in Ireland, Seamus Heaney and the Poet's Task, and Other Matters," Sean Howard's latest publication *Ghost Estates* explores this question and offers one concrete answer: "*Poetry*, of / course: do we ask what the shoemaker's // task is?"

The text opens with an image: "Modern Ireland / (*st. patrick's nightmare*) // in the gardens / of the ghost // estate, the / snakes re- // turn- / ing." The metaphor alludes to Celtic cultural reclamation, the snakes representing pre-Christian Celtic culture, the "ghost estates" artifacts of a failed age (the term coined to refer to the many allotments abandoned in Ireland following the real estate boom and recession of the previous decade). These "snakes" reclaim their "skins," or rather those of others, unfortunately unaided by the poet's choice of line breaks but nonetheless supporting the text's main theme of reclamation. This theme is explored in the context of the Troubles, Canadian colonization, and the poet's own family history—particularly that of his mother's family: "Gaelic tore at their English / like rough hands at bread." The poet's primary tool for his purpose is the myth

of Orpheus, who nearly recovers his deceased beloved Eurydice from Hades, ultimately failing when he betrays his trust in the Gods.

The text obsessively applies the Orpheus myth to a variety of icons, including John Coltrane, Jesus Christ, Samuel Beckett's evasive Godot, and of course Seamus Heaney. Indeed, the reader begins to believe that the poet sees Orpheus in everyone—an unfortunate epiphany given the hero's fate. And herein do we find, in this critic's opinion, a fundamental problem with the text: the poet's task is not, as the text seems to suggest, to reclaim or recover but to *uncover*. The other interpretation—that the poet's task is to fail, as Orpheus did—is hopefully not the correct one. Perhaps the poet's profession as an adjunct professor of political science at Cape Breton University confounds his opinion of the poet's task with that of the historian. Alternatively, perhaps the author sees Orpheus in himself, his poetry nearly completing the task he has undertaken but, like Orpheus, falling short. If this is the case, then *who* or *what* is his Eurydice?

My mother grew up in County Mayo
 during the War, a little person among the last

 of *the* little people, fairy folk sheltered deep in Irish
 Indian country, the still wild west, final stop

 before the safehouse psyche, the last place,
 today, the mind's-eye would dream

 search!

Here we find the poet's Eurydice: his family history. And here he approaches his task, but somewhat too late. The text to this point is largely comprised of what reads like notebook scribbles, including flat jokes, puns, found verses (presumably connections and epiphanies the author has made between the source and entries in his thought catalogue), and slithering passages shaped stepwise (as above), the design of which interferes at times with the poetry itself, as it is peppered with broken words awkwardly splicing lines and verses. These notes appear to be the workings of a savvy, interested, and engaged lecture attendee, but they are not necessarily of interest to the poet's audience. The lecture on "Orpheus in Ireland" has obvi-

ously impacted the poet in a profound way, but its profundity is all but lost on the reader in its poetic mutation. Nonetheless, the passages where he reveals his true muse offer great promise. One hopes Howard will overcome what Orpheus could not and share with his readers what has eluded him here.

—Caleb Harrison

Andrew McMillan, *Playtime*

London, UK: Cape Poetry, 2018

61 pages, \$21.99, ISBN 9781911214373

No amount of wealth, power, or fame could tempt me to relive my junior high school years. I was the epitome of insecure, a paradigm of uncool. Nowhere was my lack of manly bravura in greater evidence than in my feeble efforts in gym class, where I was forced to partake of such inane activities as field hockey and dodgeball. At the time, it seemed like I was lost in a crush of rowdy pubescent jocks. Now, however, I know that I am not alone among men for having disdained the manifold indignities of life as one of the boys. Doubtless this is why Andrew McMillan's new collection of poems, *Playtime*, often reads like a transcription of my own ungainly boyhood. Although I am Canadian and he is English, we were both once sensitive adolescents in the turbulent throes of puberty. And, although you couldn't pay me to go back to that time in my life, I'm grateful for having had the opportunity to reflect on it anew in light of McMillan's tender, intimately relatable poetry.

Playtime is crowded as a locker room with incidents of messy young male identification—from the earliest intimations of boyhood longing to full-fledged desire and sex. The collection is divided into two parts. The first reads like a compendium of memories recollected from adolescence—a time when one's sense of self is less readily apparent than one's sensual experience of the world—and it pays particular attention to all the shades of shame and yearning that colour this time in a young man's life. Of masturbation, for example, one speaker wonders "how many other young lads did this," while another describes how "there was one lad already / famous in our class for having snogged a girl." The speaker, by contrast, is more interested in his friend than in girls, confessing how he "saw slipped from shorts and briefs his whole private self" in a moment of voyeuristic lust.

The second part of the collection consists (mostly) of portraits of gay male adulthood, in which desire is (mostly) realized and identity seems (mostly) to cohere. Here we peek inside the mind of the thoughtful twenty-first century gay male as he ambivalently admits that “in this life / I have chosen to love only one man / and I am still in search of evidence / to prove that this was not a wrong idea.” Likewise, we riff with him on the trail of a tongue up a back: “isn’t this what humankind / was made for? telling stories learning where the skin / is most in need of touch teaching as we ourselves / were taught of pleasure.”

Despite McMillan’s interest in sexuality, and despite *Playtime*’s diptych structure, the collection offers no straightforward coming-out narrative in which the liberation of the gay man redeems the plight of his younger, closeted self. McMillan sings songs of innocence and experience, it’s true, but they are not divided by some neat narrative fall from grace into “before” and “after”—not least because McMillan presumably does not understand coming out as a “fall.” Innocence and experience comingle in these poems. McMillan’s boys are no twee cherubs. They can be cruel to each other, as in the poem “Personal Trainer,” which anticipates a scene of violent bullying from the point of view of the bully: “remember first the body must be bruised . . . I am going to punch you as though you were / a weight bag . . . in this way I will build you your abs screwing / tighter every week holding themselves closer / to the surface of the skin.” Likewise, McMillan’s adult men, at times aggressively lustful, can also be at turns gentle and sentimental, as when one speaker says of his boyfriend’s underwear, which he has been wearing all day, “less than / a year ago I could not have imagined / the possibility of something so wonderful.”

“Blood,” a melancholy yet hopeful poem, is McMillan at his most raw, unflinchingly depicting the double-edged sword of gay male identity. The speaker, who has just learned that he tested negative for sexually transmitted infections, observes that he has “put [his] ear / to the dense secrets of [his] blood and heard nothing but the curious weight which has been passed down / through the generations of this family / to know how close to us the dead are sitting / and to believe we honour them best by living.” Given the legacy of HIV/AIDS, the experience of being tested for STIs is, for gay men in particular, a routine reminder of the fragility of health and the harsh reality of mortality. Perhaps this haunting of gay men by death helps to account for McMillan’s interest in childhood. “[O]h to be that young again!”

one speaker laments upon seeing a boy: “to have a body not yet dragged and creased by age / to be as slight and brief of flesh to be a man / without the heaviness it brings . . . to still / be learning how deep the waters of desire / can run to be unafraid of drowning.”

In a poem entitled “Watching the Students,” the speaker could be McMillan himself, positioned as a poet conducting research in the field. “I can’t / show them anything,” he says, or “tell them what I want to / of their beauty.” Perhaps not, but McMillan can tell us of our beauty, provided we are unafraid to examine our ugliness as well. “[T]here is nothing I could ever ask for,” the speaker continues, “except for this one chance to watch them . . . they are / so lonely for love . . . they sit arguing the terms of how / their bodies will exist together / how they will survive the knowing of each other.” The poet remembers the angsty, incurable sweetness of adolescence, but it is precisely because he remembers it so well that he will not intervene to alleviate its symptoms in others. In another poem, he simply reflects, as these young students will one day also be able to, “how in open water / the swell that seems as though it could overwhelm you / can come to break as almost nothing on the shore.”

—Liam Monaghan, University of British Columbia