

## BOOK REVIEWS

John Metcalf, *Finding Again the World: Selected Stories*

Windsor: Biblioasis, 2018

288 pages, \$24.95, ISBN 9781771962520

John Metcalf's *Finding Again the World* introduces contemporary readers to the author's decades-long practice of short-story writing. The stories included in the collection range from early works, such as "Dandelions," which was originally published in 1970, to his latest Robert Forde stories, "Ceazer Salad" and "The Museum at the End of the World." While the stories often lament the lack of cultural appreciation in the modern world, they are equally skeptical of the authority of cultural institutions whose responsibility it is to educate the public. The protagonists, all boys or men at various stages of learning and maturity, regularly rebel against the cultural authorities that they see as variously oppressive, dangerous, or plainly unqualified guides to the uninitiated. In the opening story, "The Children Green and Golden," young boys left to their own devices in the summer flirt with the Christian education offered by "Uncle Michael"'s games in the "SUFFER THE CHILDREN CAMPAIGN." While Uncle Michael's teachings are explicitly Christian, the games involve collecting and decoding biblical stories, and they thus serve as metaphors for textual interpretation according to pre-established codes. Initially entertained, the boys nonetheless rebel against Uncle Michael and his stories, breaking his pen before returning to their initial pursuit of a flock of swallows. Here, as in other stories by Metcalf, the boys' rebellious pursuit of nature serves as a better education than the programs offered by established cultural authorities, and their destruction of the pen symbolically castrates Uncle Michael and his parables.

In the disturbing story "Keys and Watercress," the protagonist is a young boy named David who is distracted from his studies of nature by an older man, a veteran of the Boer War, who persuades him to visit his house for tea and the cultivation of his "palate" (38). In the story's horrifying cli-

max, the old man exposes his wounded leg, where “[t]he flesh sank deep, seamed and puckered, shiny, livid white and purple, towards a central pit,” and tries to make David touch it and “sink [. . . his finger] right in” (44). This is a visceral education in the traumas of history that David escapes as the old man questions his student’s taste, yelling after him, “I’ve tried to teach you. But you have no *appreciation*” (44). The story thus presents historical knowledge as encompassed by an artistic appreciation that one must develop, which also plays out in the affecting Gothic narrative of the story itself. A lack of appreciation and good taste also comes under fire in “Gentle as Flowers Make the Stones,” as a penniless poet chases good reviews and funding from the Canada Council while trying to compose a rather touching poem about his dead daughter. Metcalf’s humour comes through in his satiric representation of the literary scene, where reviewers seem to have no taste and even the gravitas of the underappreciated poet’s elegy for his daughter is undercut by the fact that his inspiration to finish it occurs as he receives oral sex on the top of Mount Royal. In this stinging portrait of Canadian literary institutions, Metcalf shows how cultural authorities often fail to live up to their noble positions.

The book’s title also points to Metcalf’s modernist understanding of culture and his skepticism of postcolonial and postmodern criticisms of the cultural exploitation generated by colonialism. That is, the stories often position the contemporary moment as having lost its connection to a “world” in which Eurocentric values are undisputed, and they present the tastes developed outside of Canada’s failing cultural institutions as a way of “finding [it] again.” The later stories are preoccupied with the sense of loss—the loss of cultural authority, perhaps, or of men like Metcalf himself. The aging protagonist of “Years in Exile,” for example, recalls the collections of items from “India, the Middle East, and Africa” he admired growing up in England and reflects on how his grandson views the work of colonial collectors now:

My youngest grandson, he of Adidas College, has called . . . them racist. I forbear to point out that his precious victims of oppression and colonialism despoiled their ancient tombs for gold and used the monuments of their past for target practice. My heart does not bleed for the Egyptians; I do not weep for the Greeks. (170)

In “Ceazer Salad,” the grumpy Robert Forde similarly studies monuments to

the Crimean War on Parliament Hill and reflects on the change in the world since he was a child: “The cannon with its Broad Arrow, the statues of Louis-Philippe Hébert, the Gothic Revival buildings behind him, all spoke the same cultural language, all belonged to the same world, a world for which his education had groomed him, a world now as relevant as potsherds and shell-middens” (218). Whereas in the earlier stories the younger protagonists push against the cultural authorities delivering their Eurocentric and colonial educations, in the later stories Metcalf’s aging protagonists, now in positions of cultural authority themselves, see the changing tastes and values of the contemporary moment as a loss of the world itself.

Metcalf’s collection thus produces an interesting trajectory of cultural education and appreciation that moves from boyhood rebellions to the nostalgic reveries of his protagonists’ senior years. The stories are strongest, however, when they forgo the cranky criticisms of cultural authorities and instead offer a vision of the aesthetic experiences that art may still offer us, as in “The Estuary.” In this story, the first-person narrator recalls his communion with porpoises who whistle to one another as they move through the water. Sensitive to the porpoises’ communication, the narrator feels the loss experienced by Metcalf’s older protagonists, for whom “[t]here came no whistle, no warm huff of breath” (59). In the narrator’s protective recollection of his brief communion with nature, the reader feels a loss worth mourning, and it is in moments such as this that Metcalf best earns his readers’ appreciation.

—Kait Pinder, Acadia University

Jennifer Houle, *Virga*

Winnipeg: Signature Editions, 2019

96 pages, \$17.95, ISBN 9781773240466

In “Filmography,” the fourth poem of Jennifer Houle’s new collection, the poet offers a list of identity markers that reads like a quick summation of every role for which I’ve ever been asked to audition: “woman, mother, waitress, shopper / . . . stripper / . . . girl in crowd, / . . . girlfriend, bitch in bar” (ll. 4-5, 15-16). In dark bars, hunched over pints of beer, colleagues and I have wondered: “Is this it? How many more times will we be asked to play someone’s secretary, nurse, or wife?” In *Virga*, Houle explores the histories

of these feminine archetypes, how they are constructed, and how they can be shattered from the force of a great fall. Stepping off the pedestal of archetypal femininity and (re)creating oneself entails just such a fall, which can be voluntary (“The Lost Pleiad”) or forced (“Asteria,” “Dorothy”), but in both cases can be a source of trauma. The question that Houle poses in her collection is whether “the long, cold / lonely tunnel down into the serious abyss” (“Samaras” l. 21) of self-creation can be reconstructed as a way to “claim” “community” with other women (“After Flooding” l. 26).

In “Asteria,” Houle considers “how to fall . . . / so it will make a difference” (ll. 39-40). In Greek mythology, Asteria fell into the Aegean sea to escape the pursuit of Zeus, transforming into an island and safe haven for other fugitive women. As speaker she asks the reader:

Would you become the rock,  
mid-sea, to hold a groaning  
sister in her pain? Become  
the very dirt and say to her  
*look up* when she did scream? (ll. 13-17)

Houle thus wonders how (re)constructing trauma as a site of community might help with healing and allow women to rewrite harmful inherited narratives. By way of an answer, *Virga* explores how fallen women, connected like “electric towers” (“Mechanic Lake” l. 30), manifest their power as a “violent storm” (“Astraea” l.31). Throughout Houle’s collection, gusts of wind and torrents of rain unsettle and reshape the “unrelenting earth” (“Nothing’s Definite” l. 29). The “bricks and mortar” of inherited and harmful ideology can only be unmade by a “wicked wind” (“After Flooding” l. 13)—by the intrusion of “airs . . . watery nature, [and] indeterminacy” (“E-fable” l. 4). As she writes in “Astraea,”

Now only the slap  
of violent storms  
might reconfigure  
hope as muscular  
as greed, might force  
together, bring  
together fighters (ll. 30-36)

The force of a violent downpour is echoed in Houle’s own “[s]torm of words” (“The Lost Pleiad” l. 55) and in the title of her work. As the publisher’s media release explains, a “virga” is “a cloud formation that occurs when rain begins to fall but evaporates before reaching the ground, only to fall again when the time is right.” When the time is right, a torrent of words is unleashed to unsettle and reshape the “[r]hythmic lies and half truths” (“Malabsorption” l. 19) of inherited ideology: “this grey we’ve all agreed to let go on and on” (“Dorothy III” l. 31). The act of falling—of *women* falling like rain—thus blurs the lines between descent and “dissent” (“Dorothy III” l. 32), as Houle explores how reading and (re)writing become tools for self creation, paving inroads to new narratives about feminine power and agency.

Houle explores the theme of descent and dissent by invoking literary women who “fell or dove from their stars into unfamiliar worlds.” Among these women is Merope, the “lost Pleiad.” As a star in the Pleiades, nestled within the constellation Taurus, Merope’s faintness left it unseen and uncharted for centuries. While this may seem a lonely fate, Houle maintains that “Maybe [it is] not so lonely after all” (“Fomalhaut” 25, footnote 1). For the women in *Virga*—both mythological and real—the ability to fall like a drop of rain and to remain fluid and unfixed is key to their survival; it is the tie that binds them and the source of their immense power to define themselves and the world around them.

—Cheryl Hann, Dalhousie University

David J. MacKinnon, *A Voluntary Crucifixion*

Montreal: Guernica Editions, 2019

418 pages, \$25.00, ISBN 9781771832724

This unusual memoir, David MacKinnon’s fourth book but first work of non-fiction, spans four decades of the author’s life and recounts experiences that could *each* be the subject of book-length, first-person remembrances, if not dispatches from Home Box Office. These include (among others) his employment at a Montreal law firm charged with litigating asbestos indictments of the Quebec government, the story of a New York firefighter friend who lost his life to the cancerous effluvium of 9/11, the story of an AIDS patient disparaged for faking his sickness, the experience of being chased through the British Columbia countryside by a madman, and accounts of

trips to the Outer Hebrides and Nova Scotia to investigate his patrimony.

What differentiates this memoir from outright history is his own involvement, which treads very close to the unbelievable. Part travelogue, part *commedia dell'arte*, part confession, this memoir summons the reader to reflect on what it means to live completely as an adult, both in thought and deed. In a word, the unique *theatricality* of his life—his travels, his risk-taking, his volatile alliances—is guaranteed to make one's own seem comparatively timid. One wonders (or I did) whether one has shirked the challenges, personal and civic, of a responsible adulthood. Even without this secondary impact, however, the book is extraordinary. When it is not a call to action, it teems with so many clear-eyed, rude, and perspicacious observations that it recalls Swift's admonition that we will know a genius among us by this sign: "that all the dunces are in confederacy against him."

The book's subject matter is so broad that it is almost impossible to summarize. Perhaps its strongest chapters, so implausible as to leave this reader gape-mouthed, recount MacKinnon's organization of the "The Long March to Rome" in 2016—an effort on the part of the world's Indigenous communities to convince the Vatican to renounce the so-called Doctrine of Discovery. Got that? The reader is at one point invited into a hotel lobby in Florence, where the author and an angry fist of Native activists dispute how to countenance Archbishop Tomasi's welcoming prayer—an insult—with a secular hymn of their own invention. As elsewhere in the narrative, MacKinnon depicts this scene with a leavening humour: "The chant of the Yakama, a bell-ringing cacaphony of shouts, threats, and grimaces would be the delegation's response to Tomasi's prayer."

The book turns more didactic after Rome, and here one reads an impressive *precis* of two enormous issues affecting current Canadian politics: the Residential School horror and the problem of missing Aboriginal women. The author, who holds an advanced degree from the Sorbonne and belongs to two law societies, conveys what prideful Canadians might see as apostasy: he ridicules our national character. He rightly points out (as did Mordecai Richler and Stephen Leacock) that we dearly want to count ourselves superior to our American cousins but choose to do so through virtue-signalling; in other words, we're humblebraggers. This section is rich with allusions, as one reads about the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, biding property law decisions in the United States, and ongoing efforts to right (or say we've righted) historical wrongs. For Canadians feeling even *mild* contempt

for the current state of leadership north of the 49th parallel, the narrative is both hilarious and scathing.

The tone of the memoir may remind some readers of John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley* (1962), which recounts a road trip across America, and I mean this as the highest compliment. Like Steinbeck, David embraces what he calls "precarity" without fear, entrusting random strangers, or *Fortuna*, to guide his way to personal salvation. That is, though the memoir's anecdotes are often scabrous, they also convey a touching faith in human possibility.

One might ask why a man who was born into relative privilege and could have enriched himself in so many fields would choose to live like this—a sort of Canadian Blaise Cendrars. I myself completed this excellent book with only half an answer, but MacKinnon leaves us one or two hints. As he walks away from a cave on the Isle of Mull, for instance, well before he has married and enjoyed the blessing of children, he explains that he seems to have been burdened (or blessed) with a genetic disposition to explore and champion difficult causes, "making a virtue of being brave and then forgotten." He continues: "I've thought about our motto since: *Audentes Fortuna Juvat*. From Culloden to Bannockburn to the great wars . . . show me the road to battle and I'll reach for my halbard and broadsword, no problem. The problem for a MacKinnon doesn't lie there in the least. It's peacetime that irks us, and irritates, and makes us reach for the whisky."

—Pat Shannon

Klara du Plessis, *unfurl: Four Essays*  
 Kentville: Gaspereau Press, 2019  
 32 pages, \$4.95, ISBN 9781554471997

The "poem . . . has no obligation to the linear or the representative," South African Canadian poet/critic Klara du Plessis writes, quoting poet Dionne Brand. There are an abundance of synchronies and overlaps in this brilliant collection of four micro-essays on the work of Brand, Erin Moure, Lisa Robertson, and Anne Carson, and, as du Plessis writes in her introduction, "I seek out female embodiment of intelligence through sensuality, radical integration into geographies of mind and space." She adds: "I am not flattening these poets through similarity. Rather, it's a curious, beauteous

phenomenon to see the reading of four poets' work channeled so clearly through a mind, a set of concerns, an ecstatic moment of being animated to write." Indeed, du Plessis' prose flows with exactly this sentiment—the urge or penchant toward what some call *jouissance*, some the wild dance between semiotics and semantics, some maternity and meaning. Expert at both parlaying between the poets' oeuvres and creating a meta-text of her own, du Plessis strives for, and achieves, nothing less than a language mimetic and celebratory of what she is describing.

Her language, quite literally, roils. In the first essay, du Plessis describes how Moure's polylingualism in "Babylonian" Montreal—Moure speaks and writes in English, French, and Galatian—inflects her sense of, and drive toward, linguistic "destabilization." Throughout, the word "embodiment" that du Plessis uses in the introduction comes to circle and haunt this taut, lyrical collection, as the author weaves surely through terminology both theoretical and experiential, vatic and colloquial. She shows us her prowess as a critic writing in the vein of what author Kate Zambreno termed "subjectivist criticism," criticism that acknowledges its own subject position while allowing that position to open up, rather than predetermine or overdetermine, the texts she "unfurls" herself. Criticism, in other words, that is up to the task of hard thinking and hard analysis yet rejects, or rather transcends, the binary terms foisted on us by the heteropatriarchal Western canon. This book exquisitely calls to mind Anaïs Nin's memorable phrase: "And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom." The poets on which du Plessis writes embody a "cohesive, poetic feminism"—a "poetry that has the ability to reconstitute language" (Brand), however historically marginalized such writing may have been.

Her close, attentive, and passionate reading includes excerpts from the poets' various works, focusing on the texts that shore up her original and vital project, such as Brand's *The Blue Clerk: Ars Poetica in 59 Versos* (2018), Moure's *Planetary Noise: Selected Poetry of Erin Moure* (2017), Robertson's *3 Summers* (2016), and Carson's *Float* (2016). In this, du Plessis strives to illuminate what—and how, as a unit—these female Canadian poets have broken the boundaries of not just Canadian or North American verse but the international scene as well, underscoring their focus not on national identity or identitarian concerns but rather on a more capacious, kairotic sense of (female) being in time—an important if not crucial and necessary intervention into the history of poetry and poetics.

Sepulchral in its finesse, playful in its quiddities, du Plessis is careful to frame her work, again, in terms of not just Canadian poetry but Western civilization. In the essay on Robertson, for example, she writes: “Robertson topples the philosophical entitlement of mental exertion and the scientific prerogative of linearity onto its head. She embodies thought and infuses creativity with the rigour of cognition, reversing the established dichotomies, embracing the possibility of a collaboration, an oscillation, between intellect and the senses instead.” This is, du Plessis writes, a “cohesive, poetic feminism,” which doesn’t skirt away from but rather dives directly into the messy morass that is our current political climate of “fourth-wave feminism,” “cyber feminism,” and, its most progressive form, “intersectional feminism.” Thus, I would call this work of criticism a step toward not just “subjectivist criticism” but an “intersectional feminist criticism,” not necessarily between genders, races, ethnicities, classes, and sexualities, as it is traditionally known, but between a more primary existential divide—namely, between “major” and “minor” literatures, “Can Lit” and “American Lit,” and, lastly, “embodied” (visceral, cosmic, and ontological). Du Plessis is thus at the forefront of a shifting notion of “canonization,” and she compellingly argues for a favouring of “truth procedures” over “truth claims,” emphasizing a bias toward process over product, authenticity of self over personae, and Marianne Moore’s “real toads” over cerebral high-wire acts that leave the reader impressed and entertained but not sold.

It’s a gift to these four poets, then, that du Plessis brings forth this work of criticism with such erudition and elan, as it situates them, historically, in a time period (and a political climate, on the heels of #blacklivesmatter, #metoo, and other movements) when such canonical and thematic restructurings are even possible. The corporeal technics of writing, and poetry itself, are thus described, in the essay on Robertson, as an “ideology of hormones”—those mercurial energies that lay silent but have the hidden potential to “unfurl” and upend our lives and consciousness on a cellular level.

What else could we ask of innovative feminist criticism? What else could we ask of poetry and all art? Recalling and speeding past Wordsworth’s definition of poetry as a “spontaneous overflow of feeling,” du Plessis’ voice, throughout, is one capable of, in the words of Robertson, “motivating agency and transformation.” In other words, it is capable of making us see how all perspectives are “slant” (to quote Dickinson) yet still valid and how the era of “absolute relativism” had more to do with a cultural nihilism than

it did with an embrace and appreciation of the complexities of interiority, subjectivity, and form, which is described by du Plessis as a “continual transfiguration.” While some poets might aspire to the Ovidian fate of Daphne, described by both du Plessis and Robertson as a woman who became a rooted tree after pleading with the gods to escape the potential rapist Apollo, du Plessis raises the stakes even higher, suggesting that we should not be obliged to or intimidated by but rather “grateful for that periphery”—that alternative, in fact, to living under the heel of a male speaker (whether in writing, reading, or life). Ending her journey with a valiant and beautiful essay on Carson, a much-esteemed poet, writer, and translator who engages with ancient texts, languages, and mythologies, she quotes her as saying, “Where [not what] is the edge of the new?”

The journey undertaken by du Plessis and these four ground-breaking poets is not without blood, sweat, or tears; it is, quite literally, a writing of and into the future, which—both like and unlike death—is that “undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveller returns.”

—Virginia Konchan, Concordia University

Jean Giono, *A King Alone*

Translated by Alyson Waters

New York: New York Review Books, 2019

176 pages, \$14.95, ISBN 9781681373096

Following the successful publication of French writer Jean Giono’s *Melville: A Novel* in 2017, New York Review Books has now released *A King Alone*, the first English translation of his 1947 novel *Un Roi sans divertissement*. The French title echoes a line in French philosopher Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées* (1670): “A king without diversion is a man full of wretchedness.” In her introduction, Susan Stewart calls *A King Alone* “the story of a remote Alpine village tormented by a serial killer” (viii), and she notes that before writing the novel Giono had been reading *Série noire* novels—a series largely consisting of French translations of American and British crime fiction. Giono could not have read too many of them, however, as Gallimard had just launched the series in 1945. Only six titles had appeared in the series by 1946, when Giono wrote *A King Alone*.

Though Stewart does not mention it, Gallimard’s *Du monde entier se-*

ries had a much greater impact on *A King Alone*. This series published great literature from around the globe, including Maurice Coindreau's translations of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930). The intelligence and sensitivity Coindreau brought to his translations helped French readers develop an abiding respect for Faulkner, even before his native land embraced him, and Giono was particularly inspired by Faulkner's use of multiple narrators. While *A King Alone* is not entirely successful, it is exciting to read such a bold experimental narrative.

Giono subdivides *A King Alone* into three episodes, each of which takes a different narrative approach. It is necessary to pay close attention, as he does not supply chapter designations or section signs and nothing breaks the episodes save a little extra white space. If you miss the break, you may find yourself having started a new episode without knowing it—and without knowing who is narrating it.

The first episode is the serial killer story. Its nameless narrator-historian first came to the village to begin his research in the early twentieth century, but the events he relates occurred during the 1840s. He spoke with practically everyone in town, drawing inferences from descendants to understand their ancestors. In short, he uses the present to reconstruct the past.

After immersing readers in nineteenth-century village life, the narrator shocks us back to the present when he observes that the local inn “is now called ‘Texaco’ because the company has placed ads on its walls” (10). This detail strikes a melancholy note. Not even this remote Alpine village can escape the reach of the modern, international corporation. But before the paragraph ends, Giono does a wonderful thing: “Then the clouds covered the road, Texaco, and everything else” (10). The clouds reclaim the village from Texaco and restore its natural beauty.

The local sawmill had been formerly owned by Frédéric II, a major character in the serial killer plot. As more villagers mysteriously disappear, leaving nothing behind but blood in the snow, a police detective named Langlois comes to town. The novel's central character, Langlois is the kinglike figure who cannot live without diversion. He moves into the inn operated by Sausage, an imposing woman who looks like she stepped out of a Fernando Botero painting. Langlois does what he can to keep the villagers safe from the unknown killer but does little detecting. Once Frédéric II discovers the killer's identity, Langlois takes charge and organizes a party to seize him.

Frédéric II narrates the last three pages of the first episode, and the narrator-historian does not resume the narration in his own voice until the start of the second episode: “I heard many things about this Langlois afterwards. At some point, more than thirty years ago, the stone bench under the linden trees was full of old men who knew how to grow old. This is how I’ve pieced together what they said to me” (55-56). These old men would have been children when the events they recall took place, but they narrate the second episode—sometimes in the first-person singular, other times in the first-person plural. Having left town after taking care of the serial killer, Langlois returns when a wolf raids the village. The wolf hunt ideally suits Langlois’ temperament, calling upon his planning skills, his showmanship, and his need for diversion. Pursued by Langlois, the wolf faces the same fate as the serial killer.

The collective narrator of the second episode continues into the third, but Sausage soon takes over the narration. She is quite a character—brash, opinionated, overbearing—and her personal knowledge of Langlois gives her an insider’s view of the events she narrates, yet she lacks the narrator-historian’s delicate touch and imaginative force. Comparing Sausage’s inside narrative with the narration of the first episode, one can clearly see how *A King Alone* goes awry. The first episode is filled with the contemplative insights and striking imagery characteristic of Giono’s other fiction, but as he lets others narrate the story, he silences himself. As a result, one reads the rest of the book longing to hear the narrator-historian’s voice again.

—Kevin J. Hayes, University of Central Oklahoma