BOOK REVIEWS

Scott Bane, *A Union Like Ours: The Love Story of F. O. Matthiessen and Russell Cheney*
Amherst: Bright Leaf, 2022
299 pages, $24.95, ISBN 978625346377

Teaching a folklore seminar years ago, I devoted one lecture to occupational lore, in which I argued that all occupations have their own folk legends. "Even professors?" one student asked, unsure how we could have any traditional stories like those of miners, sailors, or steelworkers. "Naturally," I replied, though I could not think of any good examples at the time. I have one now. Late in *A Union Like Ours: The Love Story of F. O. Matthiessen and Russell Cheney*, Scott Bane recounts Matthiessen's death, which occurred shortly after midnight on April Fool's Day, 1950, when he jumped from the twelfth-story window of a Boston hotel. Bane's version differs from the one that I've always heard, which is that Matthiessen jumped from his hotel room during the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association. The story of Matthiessen's suicide has been told and retold so many times that it has become a legend.

Matthiessen's legendary status in the profession is primarily due not to his death but to his great book *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, which appeared in 1941, when he was only thirty-nine. His close readings of Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, and Whitman became the standard interpretations of their work for decades to come, and courses titled "American Renaissance" entered the curriculum of university English departments around the world.

Bane's is by no means the first biography of its subject. The year Matthiessen died colleagues and former students collaborated on *F. O. Matthiessen, 1902-1950: A Collective Portrait* (1950). Subsequent biographical and critical studies followed: Giles B. Gunn's *F. O. Matthiessen: The Criti-*

cal Achievement (1975), Frederick C. Stern's *F. O. Matthiessen, Christian Socialist as Critic* (1981), and William E. Cain's *F. O. Matthiessen and the Politics of Criticism* (1988). In short, Bane's *A Union Like Ours* has entered a crowded field.

What distinguishes Bane's biography from previous ones is his emphasis on Matthiessen's personal life. As his subtitle shows, this book is a love story that traces the relationship of Matthiessen and Russell Cheney, a New England painter twenty years his senior, from their first meeting through Cheney's death in 1945. Beautifully structured, *A Union Like Ours* begins with a chapter on Matthiessen, taking his personal story from his birth in California to his first year at Oxford as a Rhodes scholar. Chapter 2, a parallel chapter, relates Cheney's early life. Chapter 3, the best one in the book, brings the two men together. In September 1924 Matthiessen was returning to Oxford to finish his scholarship, and Cheney was going to Europe to continue his artistic training. By chance they had booked passage on the same ocean liner, and their relationship began partway across the Atlantic. One can hardly imagine a more romantic setting for the start of a lasting love affair.

Before chapter 3 ends, Bane takes Matthiessen to Harvard, where he earned his doctorate and subsequently joined the faculty. Bane slights Matthiessen's education. Though *American Renaissance* would profoundly affect the college curriculum, Matthiessen took only one course on American literature at Harvard: Kenneth Murdock's Early American Literature. Bane describes Murdock's friendship with Matthiessen but never mentions their teacher-student relationship, which is a possible error. Empirically, the best scholars of nineteenth-century American literature have been those with a firm grounding in the study of colonial American literature.

A Union Like Ours is Bane's first book, but one can hardly tell from reading it. Bane is overfond of modal verbs, "must have" being his favourite, but otherwise his writing shows few signs of the first-timer. His choice of quotations, anecdotes, and imagery is insightful and entertaining. Bane quotes Cheney's favourite niece, who said her uncle could "imbibe culture through his nerve ends rather than his brain." His description of T. S. Eliot canoeing with Matthiessen and Cheney in a derby and spats is priceless. Bane also uses popular culture, comparing the relationship between Matthiessen and Cheney to that of Judy Garland and James Mason in *A Star Is Born* (1954). Matthiessen's literary career skyrocketed, while Cheney's

artistic career plummeted.

As their relationship matured, the two men provided psychological support for one another. Matthiessen may have had bipolar disorder, though such a diagnosis was unavailable to psychiatrists at the time. In Bane's words, Cheney was Matthiessen's "emotional safe harbor." But Cheney was a wreck toward the end of his life. A chronic alcoholic, he would go on a bender at the slightest disappointment, which could be prompted by a bad review or a poorly attended gallery opening. Guilt, remorse, and a voluntary admission to the nearest sanitarium inevitably followed. Cheney died in Kittery on July 12, 1945. He was sixty-three.

Matthiessen coped with his loneliness and depression in two ways. He threw himself into his work, often writing obsessively. In addition, he became a political activist, joining enough leftist organizations to attract the FBI's attention. Bane's interpretation of Matthiessen's obsessive behaviour is the weakest part of *A Union Like Ours*. Every time he mentions Matthiessen's obsessive writing, he characterizes it as a bad thing. From the present writer's viewpoint, few activities are more joyous or more therapeutic than writing. In postwar America writing was a far better way to cope with loneliness and depression than becoming a leftist rabble rouser, which only exacerbated the paranoia and persecution mania that accompanied Matthiessen's depression.

As an artist, Cheney is unknown outside his native New England. *The Dictionary of Art* does not even list him. His art is important mainly for its influence on Matthiessen's literary aesthetic. Cheney helped Matthiessen understand painting and apply his understanding as he wrote *American Renaissance,* the book that launched a thousand syllabi. Approaching his subject with an artist's gaze, Matthiessen has helped us all understand American literature a little better.

—Kevin J. Hayes

Stephen Morrissey, *The Green Archetypal Field of Poetry: On Poetry, Poets, and Psyche*
Victoria: Ekstasis, 2022
141 pages, $24.95, ISBN 9781771714723

The cover of Stephen Morrissey's *The Green Archetypal Field of Poetry* dis-

plays half of an old-fashioned typewriter, as if to suggest that this book represents half of a book that should be read in conjunction with the author's earlier volume, *A Poet's Journey* (also published by Ekstasis). Nevertheless, this volume is not only interesting and informative, but also quietly impassioned in its autobiographical insights.

The book begins with two epigraphs addressed to the Muses—one from Bob Dylan, the other from William Blake. Dylan's "Mother of Muses" (2020) contains the line "Forge my identity from the inside out," while Blake's "To the Muses" (1783) ends with "The sound is forc'd, the notes are few!" Morrissey's Muses navigate between forging identity and forcing sound; his green archetypal field forges ahead and gains force with each entry on poetry and psyche. Two additional epigraphs show other influences. Keats' statement in a letter of 1818 to John Taylor demonstrates a Romantic strain in Morrissey's poetry and poetics: "That if poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree it had better not come at all." Allen Ginsberg's advice, reported in the *Montreal Star* in 1967, also makes its way into Morrissey's modernist thinking: "Scribble down your nakedness. Be prepared to stand naked because most often it is this nakedness of the soul that the reader finds most interesting." Through Dylan, Blake, Keats, and Ginsberg, Morrissey bares his soul, as Keats' leaves enter Montreal's fields.

Indeed, most of these brief entries and essays were first published between 2008 and 2021 in Morrissey's blog, *Made in Montreal*. The first entry, "Poetry Is a Calling," shows the importance of vocation, avocation, and invocation. Part of the poetic calling may involve collage or the cut-up technique, which is in evidence in the structure of this book. The nine sections of "Beginning with Allen Ginsberg" reveal one form of the cut-up technique that ends with Ginsberg's words, "scribble down your nakedness." This soul baring and bearing runs throughout Morrissey's memories, as he moves to Keats' symbolism of trees and Hades: "For poets to mature it is necessary to visit the Underworld, as Persephone did; this is a journey into darkness and, if the poet has the courage, it is also a place of great creativity, of revealing what has been hidden or disguised." Morrissey journeys through the darkness of his own soul, and he also journeys across Montreal to illuminate some of the city's hidden poetry; both the ground and the sky inform his archetypal imagination.

When he compares archetypes to the patterns iron filings make in a piece of glass when a magnet is placed under the glass, we can see the con-

nection between archetypes and the cut-up technique that is also part of the poet's craft. William Burroughs is his source for this technique, which he applies to A. M. Klein's poem, "The Mountain." Cut-up involves coincidence, flashes of insight that produce metaphor, visual collages, randomness, jesting, and avoiding the imposition of the ego. (When Morrissey compares his own poem, "Heirloom," to Klein's "Heirloom," he reveals his own self-effacement: "It was almost an embarrassment after reading Klein's.") In an "Addendum" at the end of the book he presents his version of "The Mountain," which is significant not only for its cut-up but also for introducing Montreal and its poetry, which fills most of the book.

Included in his list of Montreal poets are Irving Layton, John Glassco, Frank Scott, A. J. M. Smith, Louis Dudek, and Leo Kennedy. Morrissey gives us a sense of place and poetry with these Montreal poets, and a certain nostalgia lingers for those old days when he was mentored by Dudek at McGill. A younger generation of poets starts out from the Véhicule Art Gallery; these poets include Artie Gold, Ken Norris, and Endre Farkas, and their portraits around Sir George Williams University are as interesting as those of the earlier generation.

Morrissey's collage journeys between autobiographical details and universal truths. He describes his grandmother's home at 2286 Girouard Avenue, which is his psychic centre, and contrasts it with soulless cities in a globalized world. He then shifts to poets, like Dante, who were sent into exile: "Travel, exile, pilgrimage, the desire to return home, all can be found in Homer, Chaucer, and Dante." His discussions of the archetypal home show the influence of Jungian psychology on his personal and poetic development in a quest-collage.

In the final section of the book, "Psyche," we learn about shamanism. Having mentioned his two wives earlier in the book, he now recounts a woodcut given to him by his brother—"a shaman on the back of a grizzly." The shaman is almost as big as the bear, "head turned so he stares directly at the viewer with an expression of surprise on his face, the shaman and the bear appearing from some unknown place, and always in the continuum of Inner Space." He interprets the woodcut as an archetype for rebirth after the bear's hibernation in a cave, a sign of the ursine cycle.

This hypnagogic, shamanic experience gives rise to one of Morrissey's poems: "a shaman on the back of a grizzly / the black fur a black streak / moving between the trees / then across an open grassy field." The entire

poem avoids punctuation in order to give a sense of the fluid motion between the grizzly/shaman and the observer, as well as the merging identities of all spectators. The black streak in the landscape contrasts with the white teeth later in the poem, just as the open field yields to the open mouth: "we see the white of his teeth / we see the shaman mouth open / we see him see us / we see them disappear back into the forest / they see us disappear back into the forest / we see him see us." The final six parallelisms reinforce the streaking disappearance, the back of the grizzly doubles back to "back into the forest," and the pronouns fuse the hypnagogic effect of our experience of shaman/grizzly. Like the archetypal cave, the mouth's cavity and the mystery of the hidden forest engulf all of our psyches. From green archetypal field to the mysterious forest, the poet conveys the liminality and fugue states of nature and mankind.

From this woodcut, the cut in the woods, and the cut-up technique, he returns to Girouard Avenue with its old claw foot bathtub and its subliminal connection to the grizzly's claws that tug at memory and experience. This ancestral home arrives at an understanding of the quiet zone of old age, as Morrissey's voice turns wistful and elegiac, especially when he recalls his father's death, which signalled the "Great Reconfiguration" in his life. He sees faces in clouds ("pareidolia") and invokes Rimbaud's voyant, Rilke's angel, and Lorca's duende. He is in good company, as *The Green Archetypal Field of Poetry* establishes its own duende out of mountain, heirloom, and modernism.

—Michael Greenstein

Ruth Panofsky, *Bring Them Forth*
Victoria: Ekstasis, 2022
114 pages, $23.95, ISBN 9781771715188

In this taut, finely tuned collection of poems, Ruth Panofsky again draws from an autobiographical/autoethnographic lens along time, curious and bold enough to "crouch" and search "behind the closet door" or "strum / down a hall / to free / through verse." Accessing the manifold kinds of memory, Panofsky chisels and sculpts into brief lines her concise narrative verse with sure, vulnerable strokes: the fragmented memory of trauma, both in the "shtetl" and within the walls of the bungalow where she was scarred by

a father's anger; the sensory memory of childhood and adolescence as she imaginatively recreates her evolution as a woman; and the fading and tenuous memory of her mother through her end days.

Passages that are private and revelatory are universal in the specific truth they convey. In the first segment, Panofsky commemorates the tragedy of the Sephardic Jewish expulsion with "blood on the burnished stone" and the Jews of Budapest along the River Danube, watery burial site of the drowned. In these two sites, Panofsky attests to the pain of the Jews, who faced an "inscrutable God." In "Suburbia II," she deftly sews with slender thread and needle a tapestry of Shalom Aleichem's eccentric characters into the 20th-century Jewish Canadian émigré enclave in which she was raised, all of the inhabitants "anchored to the promise / of post-war posterity." A deceptive simplicity greets the reader in words carefully chosen by the poet to carry the weight of implication. Her mother, one among a generation of women, stayed in a less than desirable union. (Not much different than "Austen's women," who "move / toward necessary / marriage" in the poem "Higher Learning.") Upon the death of her partner, Panofsky's father, her mother "[laid] to rest / a man / a marriage / her duty / done." Panofsky proceeds to share challenges she faced as a young girl and woman with reserve and a survivalist instinct as she discovers sexuality and its inherent risk and thrill.

A handful of highlights are notable for the rich detail they evoked for this reader. Sound is supreme in "Kitchen Klatch," as one of a clan of adolescent girls immersed in high school gossip munch on cream cheese crackers while her mother "rustles aluminum foil / to loose girlish chatter." Greet this still-life picture as her mother, now a widow, sits down to her "bowl of cereal / with blueberries / measured out to / morning's brightness." The poet, a portrait artist, recognizes her grandmother's physical traits in her own mirror image: the "broad hips / thick thighs / body / wending / a return / to the safe / enclosure / of her / spreading lap." In this ancestral tie of the poem "Embodied" the physical and spiritual are inseparable. In the following poem, "This Long Hair," Panofsky recounts in tercets, each ending with a different verb, the idiosyncratic relationship members of her family line have had with their hair. And in her closing poem, "The Task of a Hand," the poet reminds us of the miracle of everyday life and limb, of our dexterous capacity, of the inspiring things our hands can do as they "caress the face of a lover"; "[scratch] out words on a page"; "wring out / the world's pain"; or

in a quiet small movement, "stroke [a cat's] sleek fur."

This book of poems that summons up the past while linking it to the present is accessible, heartfelt, and memorable in the depiction of a woman's life recaptured. Panofsky's lyrical verse so honestly composed in short-breath lines propels the reader on from page to page. It is a pleasure to read and behold.

—Carol Lipszyc

Aaron Schneider, *The Supply Chain*
Toronto: Crowsnest, 2023
250 pages, $24.99, ISBN 9780921332947

Aaron Schneider is a writer who pushes the boundaries of fiction in ways that are not completely recognizable, at least in a CanLit context. *The Supply Chain*, a story about Matt Nowak, a normie husband and new father who works a desk job for a company involved with shipping parts for weaponry used in the Middle East, continues this trajectory in a longer format than in his novella, *Grass-Fed* (2018), or his collection of short fiction, *What We Think We Know* (2021).

The book's first few pages transition from historical facts to a remarkably detailed and accurate look at the kind of suburban living that is still common in swaths of Canada, even if it might seem alien to (often downwardly mobile) literary types. One compelling long-view passage reads,

> For decades, developers have been building south towards the 401, north and east and west, carving new subdivisions out of cornfields, laying down looping roads, crescents, and ways lined with houses whose garages are thrust towards the street and whose front doors are set back from it. These houses are thrown up in a rush and all at once by companies with names like Artisan Homes, Heritage Construction, and Rembrandt Properties.

The scene then transitions into an interior description of the "books Ruth and Matt bought at the Indigo a short drive from their house, books about parenthood, early childhood development, infancy, gestation, books that they stacked on the coffee table, next to their alarm clock, and in a pile by

Ruth's side of the bed." Scenes like the latter establish one of the book's key conceits: a skepticism toward or even mockery of the supposedly transcultural and transhistorical sense of exhilaration that comes with parenthood.

The second section, "The Supply Chain," begins with a graphic that temporally maps both familial and historical war events in a common genealogy. It's similar to what Schneider has done so innovatively in his short fiction. Shortly after comes a list of port stops and transits through which various parts, including weapons parts, travel:

> From Fire Lake. To Mont-Wright. From Mont-Wright. To Fire Lake. To Love. To Port-Cartier. From Port-Cartier. Down the St. Lawrence River. Through Lake Ontario. To Hamilton. From Hamilton. To Burlington. To Erin Mills. To Brampton. From Brampton. To Milton. To Cambridge. To Woodstock. To London. From London. To Woodstock. To Toronto. Along the north shore of Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River. To Montreal.

Somewhat like Moez Surani's *Operations* (2016), it's a noun-heavy, bluntly physical representation of the nuts and bolts of the military-industrial complex. That physicality appears again when Schneider provides descriptions of the members of Matt's swim team, each of which begins with a name in bold text. Schneider is adept at rendering the little social awkwardnesses and associated judgments that most of us are conditioned not to mention. Swimmer Jesse Brown, for instance, "for no reason that anyone could articulate, lost out on the adolescent lottery that decides who is attractive and who is just average, who is cool and who is ridiculous"; he "talked about body sprays" and, the last Matt has heard, "was halfway through an MBA from the University of Phoenix."

The prose narrative frequently breaks into poetic language or even straight-up poetry. An early passage about Matt's swimming lessons is followed by a poem titled "Camp de Suippes, Firing Range, France":

> A long and weedy field
> runs away
> crossed with low banks of pale gravel
> tufted
> with grass.

Another scene, featuring the family's trip to Poland, shows a compelling picture of fumbling with a misremembered childhood language:

> "Proszę" was "Pro Shuh" for Mary, "Pro Chuh" for Rob, and then "Pro-**CH**uh" for both of them. They sat there together, at the end of the terminal, absorbed in teaching each other this version of Polish that was poised somewhere between Mary's English and Rob's unreliable memories, and that was entirely their own.

The end of the book is a refreshing and unique take on our cultural moment. It is an uncomfortably honest look at parenthood that ultimately resolves itself with a cliché; I will not describe it here. Suffice to say it is an affecting resolution to a plot about how grinding cruelty normalizes itself in the workplace, in the final products of our labours, and in the so-called milestones of an adult life, as well as the ways in which pretty much all of us are complicit in the process.

—Carl Watts, Huazhong University of Science and Technology

T. P. Wood, *77° North*
Oakville: Mosaic Press, 2023
300 pages, $27.95, ISBN 9781771616843

Since dwellers of mid-latitudes looked to the horizon and started to explore, particularly by ship, each of the cardinal directions of the compass has had its own mystique but none—not east, south, or west—has been more beguiling or strangely bewitching than north. The lure of "Thule" or "Ultima Thule" (pronounced "too-lee," meaning north in ancient Greek and Latin) drew adventuresome sailors toward the pole, but throughout the ages the idea of north has also compelled writers and artists, who have feasted on the first-hand accounts and maps of explorers and produced rather more fanciful—but nevertheless engaging—imaginings of north and what it might be, what it might mean in the grand scheme of global affairs.

To that remarkable canon of speculative fiction, reaching back from *Taaqtumi* (2019), an anthology of northern horror stories by Inuit authors like Aviaq Johnson, and Arvaarluk Kusugak's *A Promise Is a Promise* (1988), a fanciful retelling for children of the Inuit legend called *Qallupiluit*, through

the likes of Glenn Gould's radio documentary *The Idea of North* (1967) or Richard Rohmer's imaginings of northern futures in the 1970s, to the 19th-century classics of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Jules Verne, and Mary Shelley, we can now add the exceptional début novel *77° North* by T. P. Wood. Says Wood, "my artistic desire [was] to write a captivating and imaginative novel reflecting contemporary issues, and how we define ourselves as a country moving through the 21st century." That he has done. Bravo, Tom Wood!

At the centre of Wood's tale is a clever young Inuit woman, Chulyin Nakasuk, from Pangnirtung in the Qikqtaaluk Region of Nunavut, who struggles with the ways in which western tenets and values and conventional science have eclipsed other epistemologies in the nexus of old and new, traditional and non-traditional, Inuit and non-Inuit. Of the many generative discussions that *77° North* will catalyze, not least will be about the authority on which a white non-indigenous male from Welland, Ontario might write a character like Chulyin. The same, I suppose, with a sub-Saharan filmmaker, or a Japanese scientist. But that he does, and does believably, respectfully, and compellingly, particularly when he riffs on what shamanism might look like from the inside. And Wood seems as comfortable and credible evoking the Arctic as he is the rain forests of meso-America, the runic secrets of Sahrawi, or the vagaries of the imagined energy universe of the Foundlings, as Chulyin chases her dream to be the finest archaeologist in the world.

The disciplined arc of the story is embroidered with taut, poetic prose, animated by often rollicking dialogue and populated by a small cast of believable characters who finish up in Qaanaaq, Greenland (formerly Thule before the expansion of an American Air Force base forced these Inuit to relocate in 1953), wrestling the most delightfully and disturbingly inventive-yet-plausible set of problems, centring on a massive object revealed in melting ice, not unlike the giant meteorite that Robert E. Peary "stole" from the Greenlandic Inuit in 1897 and that was eventually sold by his wife to the American Museum of Natural History. This kind of historical and geographical verisimilitude between the world as it is and the world as it is imagined in the novel speaks to what must have been semi-maniacal research on Wood's part to give his story the right ring of authenticity. But I will say that making December 21st a crux date in the story and calling this day the "equinox" instead of the "solstice" in the celestial calendar, is enough to shake a reader's confidence in the underpinnings of what is otherwise a solid editing

and production process on the part of Mosaic Press.

In the end, it is the questions the book raises and the timeliness of *77° North* that I find most compelling. Thanks to the science and scholarship of climate change, planet-shrinking transportation and communication infrastructure, shifting political boundaries and responsibilities, polar conflicts over land and resources, the appetites of big business, and the ever-expanding influence of northern indigenous artists and writers, the Arctic—as a place, as an idea—has shifted from the margins toward a more central position in the consciousness of particularly non-northerners. Wood does not burden his readers with *any* detail, really, about how these characters and this plot came to be or how it is that he is able to write with such fluency about far-flung places like Baffin Island, Greenland, Guatemala, or North Africa. But where his forebears in this genre might have conceived the Arctic as a world separate from theirs, as I reader I get a sense that the north is part of Wood's world. He seems to have embraced it in his thinking, in his very being, as a writer and commentator, which is exactly where the rest of us need to be if we are to tackle with any hope of success the intractables and improbables revealed and explored in this very fine new novel.

—James Raffan