

Book Reviews

THE BRIEF REINCARNATION OF A GIRL

BY SUE GOYETTE

KENTVILLE, NS: GASPEREAU PRESS, 2015. 61 PAGES. \$19.95.

“LOGIC! GOOD GRACIOUS! What rubbish!” exclaims E.M. Forster in the epigraph to Sue Goyette’s *The Brief Reincarnation of a Girl*. With this citation, Goyette firmly turns her back on logic, suggesting it is inadequate to the story at hand: a young girl—a toddler—is dead “from prolonged exposure to a cocktail of drugs that a psychiatrist had prescribed to treat ADHD and bipolar disorder.”

Goyette takes on the trial, though it is unclear who is being tried. The courtroom is crowded with participants in the tragedy: the mother, who was at her “wit’s end” dealing with the girl’s behaviour; the doctor, who justifies her liberal prescription practices; and the father, a lecherous drinker who is distracted by a “fire in his crotch ... [fed] with young girls dressed to play tennis” (27). They are joined by the judge, a slew of unidentifiable lawyers, the jurors, the daycare teacher, the ghost of the girl, her bear, a unicorn (prescribed, of course), and poverty, which steals around the courtroom, feeding on words and sensations. Amidst all these figures, there is little room to feel the girl’s death, as each moment of the trial leans towards the needs of the living. Realizing this, the ghost of the girl intervenes during the jury’s deliberation, moving “the idea of the girl and her bear away from the edge of the table” before they drop out of mind (56).

Goyette uses myth and metaphor to interrogate the slippery nature of mental illness and drug-based treatments. The doctor’s testimony pathologizes the girl’s behaviour and includes sleeplessness as a symptom of bipolar disorder:

In this particular case, the doctor noted, given the caterpillar and witch recklessness, the loud motor and the silliness of a girl being a truck, the girl’s sleeplessness indicated that the synapses in her brain were not releasing enough serotonin which is generally where lullabies incubate. (24)

The doctor prescribes ad nauseum: she prescribes the father “trenchcoats,” then “bricks and nuns,” after he “had overdosed on under-

garments” (37). She prescribes herself “a daydream” (8), and “She once, notoriously, prescribed / a shot of hurricane to a recovering umbrella” (3). When it is revealed that the dead girl’s bloodstream contained “three times the maximum / dosage of fairy tales where unicorns were usually sighted,” the doctor defends herself by pointing to the “nature of unicorns, no one is sure where they are / and how to capture them” (51). The medication is as unpredictable as the diagnosis is inexplicable. Goyette builds absurdity into the scaffolding of mental health discourse, and so tests out the authority of this discourse after all.

Goyette has taken a news story that is incomprehensibly cruel—a story that exceeds the fragile limits our justice and medical systems—and she lets that excess reign. The poems, crafted in imitation of court proceedings, have a momentum. The cadence of cross-examination and testimony have a pace all their own, and are complemented by chaotic interactions throughout the courtroom, including the father’s disruptive lust and poverty’s hungry movements. And though she grounds these poems in the form and space of the courtroom, Goyette recognizes that our justice system cannot offer a satisfactory resolution. The momentum of the poems eventually leads us outside the courtroom, on the back of the bear: “The bear carried the ghost of the girl tenderly / in her teeth and ran until walls and verdict were replaced / by trees” (60). Goyette is compassionate in her choice here: the teddy bear—so tender and intimate—grows into something strong and sure, something that can carry the ghost of the girl to a kind of peace or justice.

This text brings its readers into dark territory. The blurb alone is shattering, and the decision to follow Goyette into the depths of this story is daunting. But this effort is timely, even necessary. We are stumbling through a time of blatant injustice, as rulings on police violence and sexual assault incite widespread protest. Or rather, the injustice is not new, and this is simply a concentrated moment of grief and anger. But given our present moment, it is gratifying to sit with Goyette’s words and process one particular tragedy, to recognize with her the absurdity of our systems, and to imagine our way out of them. Don’t we all need a bear, strong and tender, to carry us away? We certainly need the time and tools to start imagining where away is and what it looks like—*The Brief Reincarnation of a Girl* is just such an offering.

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MISSION CREEP

BY JOSHUA TROTTER

TORONTO, ON: COACH HOUSE BOOKS, 2015. 99 PAGES. \$18.95.

A “GARDEN PATH” SENTENCE is a sentence that begins in such a way that elicits an interpretation that must be reevaluated once the sentence is complete. For example, “The dog walked by the house barked,” is initially interpreted as a dog walking unaccompanied (i.e., “The dog walked by the house...”) but once the reader comes across the final word “barked,” it is realized that the dog is being walked. Garden paths are one example of the trickery used in *Mission Creep*. Joshua Trotter leads readers down endless garden paths, constantly challenging and changing our interpretations of the content. The result: beautiful nonsense.

“One’s mined wonders. One’s mind’s reels.” This pair from the opening page of *Mission Creep* is a prime example of Trotter’s trickery. Both sentences take advantage of the tendency to read groups of words instead of individual ones and to make assumptions about the words in these groups based on previous reading experiences. “One’s mind wanders” comes to mind when reading the first sentence because a) the two are phonetically identical and b) it is a familiar figure of speech. The reader is tempted to read the second sentence as “One’s mind reels” (probably given the familiar figure of speech) but must reinterpret the sentence when noticing that tiny “s,” which alters the sentence’s meaning, painting a picture of the mind as reels of film. This is ironic because *Mission Creep* is non-linear. Just when one begins to grow comfortable with the cadence of the work, Trotter interrupts with “[unintelligible]”:

“The movie [unintelligible] all along thruways north of New
Domino, sunlight sears poplars topless, draining drivers’ retinas.”

Such indications of unintelligibility make it difficult for the reader to establish what is going on. Trotter acknowledges this quality, aptly describing the text as “A spun radio dial passing clean through poetry.” Given this description, unintelligibility may indicate a poor signal, neither the fault of the reader nor the author.

Trotter effectively deconstructs language through word play to a point of catastrophe, at one point descending into a jumble of nonce

words in “Transmission Creep.” The poem begins, “The Oracle requests ten minutes’ radio silence.” Following this, the requested silence is given increasingly strange qualifications: “Swallowtime silence. Staunch-the-Hawking-Mannheim silence...Science-of-the-iambis silence...Eamaged-goods pilence...N plequ suanding Jq...” In this way, Trotter consciously alters our ability to read and interpret the work.

The only sense of continuity Trotter gifts the reader in *Mission Creep* is granted by the consistency of recurrent landmarks, entities, and items. Some of these include New Domino City, River Phoenix, Evel Knievel, a Bell Magnum (a type of motorcycle helmet), the Oracle and the Iron Wind. Despite their recurrence these things give little comfort to those who seek coherence because most of them are problematic or contradictory in and of themselves. For example, one might imagine the Iron Wind as a metaphor for a strong wind. However, the Iron Wind in *Mission Creep* ends up “...gnawing the straps of our backpacks...,” “slip[ping] through the tongo, also known as mangrove,” and performing other strange feats. One might contrast the Iron Wind with the Iron Curtain; however the Iron Wind doesn’t just keep us out, it actively forces us out. Indeed, at one point an anonymous voice (perhaps Trotter’s editor?) interjects, “<<I am still puzzled by the Iron Wind epithet...>>.” But this misunderstanding is the desired effect of the Iron Wind, and perhaps much of *Mission Creep*. Trotter does not seem interested in allowing his reader the pleasure of understanding. Instead we must focus on how we are reading.

But what is the culmination of Trotter’s trickery? As its title suggests, *Mission Creep* goes beyond its original intent, which was inspired by the CIA’s “Human Resource Exploitation Manual.” Ultimately, what is being read is less important than how it is being read. *Mission Creep* is not a manual that exploits human resources, but the very instrument of that exploitation, a manipulation of its readers’ reading, a garden path that never resolves. As such it will baffle, amuse, and please its readers, exposing them to the strangeness of language and the odd habits of how we read.

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