

BOOK REVIEWS

Chris Arthur, *Reading Life*

Mobile, AL: Negative Capability Press, 2017

214 pages, \$15.95, ISBN 9780998677712

Like the French phenomenologists Gaston Bachelard and Francis Ponge, Chris Arthur explores the significance of everyday objects that we may otherwise take for granted. His lyrical essays probe the essence of objects as diverse as his daughter's feet or a whale's tooth and enable the reader to share in the consciousness of these intimate experiences.

Each essay is divided into several sections, which allows the reader to absorb an image slowly before moving on to the next section where the image takes on additional associations. The author's introduction describes the Irish river Shimna, which he crosses by a set of stepping stones. Arthur imparts the experience of almost walking on water and watching salmon swimming like "ghostly torpedoes hinting at the presence of another world close to, yet different from, our own." The poet-essayist glides into metaphor and association, always attuned to proximities and distances, boundaries and borderlines.

He then shifts to the Irish myth of the Salmon of Knowledge. Finnegas the Bard catches the elusive salmon and instructs his young apprentice, Finn MacCool, not to eat the fish. When some hot fat from the cooking fish spits onto Finn's thumb and he sucks it to relieve the pain, he immediately becomes enlightened because the Salmon of Knowledge had eaten from the nuts of nine hazel trees that grew beside a magic undersea well. This mythological ecosystem points to Arthur's sensitivity to the "fecundity of fragments." This alliteration highlights an essential quality of *Reading Life*: each fragment of each essay is a stepping stone to another level of meaning. The cover of *Reading Life* also depicts a mythological fish framed by braided borders, and the concept of braiding is essential to Arthur's method of yoking experiences and consciousness. By the end of the 15 essays, the reader

gets closer to Finn and his catch.

The first essay, "Footnotes," is subtitled "Reading My Daughter's Feet." The play on words or double entendre is meant to further the multiplicity of meaning and to enrich the act of reading the mundane into the memorable: "The way in which her bare feet respond and how, in turn, my hands react to the silent prompts delivered by her toes, is almost like a silent language." This silent language—a filial ritual—finds expression in Arthur's "secret vault of the familiar." The link between footstep and mind, daughter and father, and writer and reader resides in phrasing, such as "to kick-start a particular train of thought," where the play on the verb initiates associations. Father traces daughter's lifelines through "curiously moving" footprints before ruminating on the history of mankind's footprints from past to future generations.

The patter in the pattern and the aura of metaphor recur in subsequent essays. "Fuchsia" involves reading a patch of fallen blossoms. The flower evokes a nectar of connections, unexpected linkages, and the drift and flow of feelings. His free association leads him to think of suspension bridges. "Priests" focuses on fishing and the relationship between Ulster Protestants and Roman Catholics during the "Troubles" that dominated Irish politics for decades. We learn that "priest" also refers to the flat wooden club used to kill caught trout. Arthur's father also owns a Beretta, which he throws into the water, and his son later traces the history of Beretta back to Michel de Montaigne in the sixteenth century. This, in turn, leads to the next essay on "Reading Montaigne," which begins with the need for family, goods, and health, but qualifies those needs with self-reliance. To guard against loss, "we must reserve a back shop all our own, entirely free, in which to establish our real liberty...and solitude."

"Tracks (Reading Footprints in the Snow)" could serve as a companion piece to "Footnotes" or the essays on cycling and fishing. "Sonatina for Oboe and Bayonet" relates the experience of reading Erich Maria Remarque's WWI novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928). The author's young daughter is reading the novel and asks her father the meaning of "bayonet." She is also studying oboe, and these two images form an "icon of incongruity" in her father's mind. In addition to these chance juxtapositions, Arthur also penetrates palimpsests in the texts he's reading, as seeing his own signature or someone else's in a book leads him back in time to explore hidden lives at a particular time and place, caught in the act of reading.

When Arthur quotes Kobayashi Issa's haiku, "What a strange thing, / To be thus alive / Beneath the cherry blossoms," he makes us aware of the simplicity and complexity of man's relation to art and nature. He doesn't take for granted the most common objects, but instead teases out their variations, reading from them and into them, beneath and above the blossoms. The motif of hands and feet recurs in "Memory Sticks," where the author "reads" three old walking sticks that belonged to members of his family. The sticks come to life through voice and the pairing of wood grain and palm lines.

The final essay, "Reading Life," examines J. A. Baker's book *The Peregrine* (1967). This essay approaches fiction with its invention of characters reading Baker's book. "Afterword" aptly summarizes the art of reading essays, as Arthur maps the "paths that meander, entangle, turn back upon themselves, and simply stop." Turning paths and pathos certainly apply to *Reading Life*. Arthur quotes another essayist, Richard Chadbourne:

The essay is a brief, highly polished piece of prose that is often poetic, often marked by an artful disorder in its composition, and that is both fragmentary and complete in itself, capable both of standing on its own and of forming a kind of "higher organism" when assembled with other essays by its author.

A final footnote estranges the familiar with luck and play, unmethodical method, the logic of music, and the law of heresy. Between gaps and juxtapositions, Arthur's essays breathe life into his chosen genre. Rubbing together walking sticks, he sparks the imagination from Ireland to other worlds.

—Michael Greenstein

Stephanie Chambers et al., eds., *Any Other Way: How Toronto Got Queer*
 Toronto, ON: Coach House Books, 2017
 368 pages, \$25.95, ISBN 9781552453483

There is no better way to describe this book than with its final sentence, which resists completion: "Toronto's queerness is not an accomplished state of being, but rather a constant process of becoming." With 9 editors, 105 es-

says, and over 110 contributors, *Any Other Way* offers many takes on this “process of becoming.” The collection is grounded in its opening essay: Steven Maynard’s reverent ode to Jackie Shane—the queer, black, and transgender singer of “Any Other Way” and a pioneer in Toronto’s queer scene. Shane “was a glittering sequin of hope” in a 1960s Toronto that had a long way to go towards (safe, diverse) queerness. The collection weaves out from Shane’s story, resulting in a beautifully messy tapestry of Toronto’s queer history and present—one that is wrought with tensions and knots, some sections woven in tight, attentive detail and others left dangerously loose and untended. Each reader can follow their thread of choice through these essays—print culture, geography, health, law and order, performance—and know that all these threads are interwoven in fascinating ways.

As a whole, *Any Other Way* is ambitious, and the editors offer a rationale for how they have grasped such a large project. The book does not offer a chronological order of events and people because “[d]oing so seems almost always to privilege a history that begins and dwells on homosexuals of distinction—notable white men.” Instead, the essays are arranged loosely by theme with a section like “Sex” juxtaposing pieces across generational and technological divides.

One of the major narratives that unfolds across dozens of pieces is the relationship between Toronto’s queer communities and the police. While some writers describe the trials and elations of building working relationships with the police, others demand that police leave queer spaces, building context and support for Black Lives Matter Toronto’s demonstration and demands at the 2016 Toronto Pride Parade. Chanelle Gallant uses her brief essay to lament her own participation in bringing police into queer spaces, recalling the protests after the police raid on a women’s bathhouse known as the Pleasure Palace: “I was shocked to see that in our complaint, we had demanded that the police actively recruit LGBTQ people into the service. At the time, I felt the police were a necessary evil, a terrible and mostly misapplied form of power that was necessary for the greater good. But a rainbow-coloured fist is still a fist.” It is important to see these reflections at work, as they contribute to an understanding of where queer movements have faltered or failed and why Pride events across Canada are increasingly unsafe spaces for so many queer people.

Despite these critical interventions—and the editors’ clear efforts at disrupting the biases of linear histories—the collection is heavily weighted

towards stories of gay, white, and cis-gender men. In fact, the collection has the same “blind spots” that interviewee S. Y. sees in “Toronto’s problems with anti-Blackness, lack of trans rights, [and] Indigenous rights.” (I would also add ableism to the list, as does contributor Andrew Gurza.) It is the collection’s weaknesses and gaps as much as its strengths that ultimately leave me—after so much reading—still wanting more. The essays trace queer spaces—including clubs, bathhouses, the Steps, and private/collective home spaces—across decades, leaving me with a new understanding of Toronto’s queer geography and a strong desire to know where and how queerness occupies suburban space. The contributors passionately demonstrate how difficult the fight for equal rights was (and is) but also indicate the tenuous status of these rights. And while the editors attempt to resist a white, male narrative, many essays offer tantalizing glimpses at “queer geneolog[ies]” that have been neglected and that are necessary for the queer community to thrive. Yet I also recognize the limitations of this book, and I hope that the collaboration and energy behind *this* project produces more histories and documents.

Finally, this book is in dire need of an index. The essays circle around many of the same people, places, and organizations, and it would be extraordinarily helpful to be able to trace every mention of things like the Steps, Sister Women Press, or the Music Room. Without an index, the book is an impressive but unwieldy resource. For the non-scholarly reader, however, this book has a lot to offer. With so many brief but riveting essays and an organization that does not rely on a linear building of names, places, and details, this book is the kind you can read in a handful of sittings or over months and months. It leaves the reader eager and energized.

—Kaarina Mikalson, Dalhousie University

Joshua Whitehead, *Full-Metal Indigiqueer*

Vancouver, BC: Talonbooks, 2017

128 pages, \$18.95, ISBN 9781772011876

Joshua Whitehead’s debut poetry collection is exactly what Canada—and Canadian poetry—need right now. Even with a self-consciously bold title like *Full-Metal Indigiqueer*, splicing a reference to Stanley Kubrick’s Vietnam War film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) together with a defiantly queer-in-

digenous identity, the 128-page interior makes room within itself to shock, surprise, bewilder, and delight.

Whitehead's collection begins with eight and a half black pages, which open up onto mechanically-dotted white circles in increasing size. By page 7, a coded message appears: "H3R314M." The poems that follow address everything from reconciliation and decolonization (or continued colonization) to sex, gluten-free desserts, Shakespeare, and *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-). In the poem "the garbageeater," Whitehead's persona, Zoa, asks, "can you see me [questionmark]." It is a question he answers in different ways throughout *Full-Metal Indigiqueer*:

im full of sharp edges
 thatcut&cut&cut
 settlers expect too much from me
 where i can be sucked with a straw
 & swallowed in a single sip
 you ooh-&-ahh

Here, indeed, is our eponymous full-metal speaker.

Whitehead's debut is both formally and metaphorically brazen, exemplifying a kind of controlled chaos that Whitehead sometimes calls "ndn chaos," evoking by turns the chaos "ndn" people are seen to cause and the chaos thrust (historically, contemporaneously, futuristically) upon them. His poems play with the incoherence of the former (i.e. the blame that has been levelled at indigenous populations throughout Canada's history), but they also refuse to confine themselves to the terms of that imagined identity and fold the various intersections of Zoa's experience into their pages. On one page, an 8cm-long drawing of an erect penis overhangs a muted British flag. On another, a dense passage without word spacing or punctuation demands that its reader squint their way through a confrontation between customer and employee:

[...] maamcutsmeoffandsaysdontinterruptitsrudeihav
 etherighttospeakthisiscanadaandfreedomofspeechisafundamentalrighttel-
 lherokokok

Racism, colonialism, nationalism, gender identity, sexual orientation, and

class all come under fire in a collection that interrogates itself with equal verve. As Zoa narrates in “re(z)erving paradise,” a poem that tears down John Milton, Walt Whitman (“colonial fuck”), and Edvard Munch, among others,

i think: what the fuck am I doing writing a poem
while my aunt is dying in front of my eyes [questionmark]

But he writes the poem anyway and preserves the perversity of his creative impulse/rebellion within it: “since when do settlers know how to scream [questionmark].”

The result is a series of heartbreaking but playful poems that navigate the boundaries of their protagonist’s identities with extraordinary control. Indeed, just as Whitehead knows when to hold back and let the reader judge a customer’s “right” to free speech for themselves, he is able, when the poems calls for it, to lean fully into the acuity of his own experience. A poem called “id say ‘ill be back’ but i never intend to leave” provides just one example of this unflinching self-awareness:

so i eat a slice of cake
& purge it in his toilet when we get home
make sure i wash my mouth
so as not to corrode his cock
because ill need it later
when i need an ejection of confidence

These moments are raw and undeniably uncomfortable, but they are also Whitehead at his best, truly naked, plunging into emotional extremes of anger, shame, desire, and love.

Born of this kind of fearless experimentation, Whitehead’s collection occasionally hits a flat note or seems to detract from its own intensity with excess metatextual wordplay. His use of text-speak and internet jargon, for example, threatens to date the work more quickly than that of other collections published this year. Yet this hybrid aesthetic also drives the urgency of his poems forward and lends an important momentum to the critical perspectives they advance. Parentheses and fragmentary spellings are often used to deconstruct the colonial authority of the English language,

and the injection of Cree words to signify grandmother (*kokum*) and father (*nôhtâwiy*) helps to ground those familial relations in an immediately contemporary (and technologically-defined) world.

In the fourth-to-last poem, which is titled “mihkokwaniy” (the Cree word for “rose”) and accompanied by a picture of his grandmother, who was murdered in the 1960s, Whitehead dedicates his words “to all missing & murdered Indigenous women, girls, & two-spirit peoples; for their families, friends, loved ones & kin.” In his acknowledgements, he makes a similarly outward-facing appeal “to the writers who have paved the way for me to write [...] i owe you so much more than this page [period].” These gestures encapsulate the significance of Whitehead’s words perhaps more than anything else. His poetry focuses acutely on individual experience and the singular body, yet it is also consistently engaged with the forces that have put the body and its trials into play. No one but Whitehead could have written *Full-Metal Indigiqueer* and yet, because his collection does not presume to speak for others but only to or beside them, the impact of his words extends well beyond himself: “today we survive; tomorrow we resist.” This is politically-engaged poetry at its very best.

—Genevieve Zimantas