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Emergent Fiction

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Emergent Fiction 2015

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The sixty-four works of emergent fiction received this year evidence several noteworthy transitions in Canadian prose. While it is admittedly problematic to discuss the novels and collections of short stories as some form of unified whole, several patterns emerged that merit highlighting and demand critical attention because they represent new directions for Canadian fiction.

The texts mark the arrival of a new wave of literary experimentation that embraces risk-taking and the pursuit of novelty as fundamental characteristics of good art and great storytelling. The featured texts created wonderfully new ways to tell stories by inventing narrative techniques or breaking with generic conventions. This trend is, perhaps, best exemplified by the fact that many fictions – such as Anakana Schofield’s *Martin John*, Jess Taylor’s *Pauls*, Jean Marc Ah-Sen’s *Grand Menteur*, Jon Chan Simpson’s *Chinkstar* – were difficult to describe as their prose was so creative that it defied existing categories and ways of making sense of literature. In contrast to earlier Canadian experimental movements that tended to import and adapt new forms from other places, emergent authors appear to be tinkerers who find beauty in the unexpected and take delight in the pursuit of the avant-garde.

The emergent fiction of 2015 also suggests there is a new shift from realism toward romanticism in Canadian prose. The two modes are distinguished by their degrees of artifice: realism privileges rationality, causality, and everyday characters, whereas romanticism features irrationality, the fantastic, and characters with hyperbolized or extraordinary abilities. Canada

has been a bastion for mimesis since the modern realist movement emerged in the 1920s. It is remarkable that the majority of texts blended romantic conventions – allegory, metaphor, magic, the marvellous, and intentional artifice – with psychologically compelling characters and contemporary settings. The degree of romanticism varied. On the lower end of the scale are the skateboarding teenagers who thwart a criminal enterprise – Hardy Boys style – in Michael Christie’s *If I Fall, If I Die* or the surrealist mobsters in Andrew Battershill’s *Pillow*. The protagonists’ talents are torqued like those in an action movie. On the high end of the scale are the robots, mermaids, sirens, and banshees who populate the stories in Katherine Fawcett’s *The Little Washer of Sorrows*. In the latter example, the fantastical facilitates aesthetic speculations – beautiful, entertaining “what ifs.”

A second noteworthy feature of the emergent romanticism is the urbanity of the fiction. Historically, Canada’s urban fiction has been regionalist and/or ironic – texts tend to document a sense of place, satirize the absurdities of urban living, or feature tragedies of belonging. The vast wilderness absorbed the romantic thoughts of Canadians, while the city served as a dumpster, of sorts, that contained the horrors of modernity: dehumanizing industrialization, traumatic immigration, visible inequity, social disruption. These themes remain prevalent, but recent fiction has pursued the urban milieu with a spirit of wonderment, playfulness, and hope. See Jon Chan Simpson’s *Chinkstar*, an epic in which fantastically talented gangsta-rappers imagine a new form of transnational belonging in downtown Red Deer. Witness too the uncanny surrealism of R.W. Gray’s *Entropic* and the fantastic speculations in Rhonda Douglas’s *Welcome to the Circus*. Never before have so many authors imagined Canadian urban centres as magical places where the extraordinary occurs.

Authors also expressed a heightened thematic and aesthetic interest in post-industrialism – the hollowing out of manufacturing and related industries due to automation and offshoring, and the simultaneous rise of the new economy, particularly the knowledge-, creativity-, and service-based industries. The social and economic repercussions of post-industrialism were prominent in texts featuring millennials and the Great Recession. Millennial characters express a widespread anxiety that recognizes they will never have it as easy as boomers and are the first generation in hundreds of years to witness a decline in quality of life in comparison to their parents. The fiction avoids forcefully contesting post-industrialism but rather contemplates how the gig economy affects one’s sense of self and relationships with others. Several depicted how post-industrialism is causing a crisis of masculinity in which young males struggle to maintain traditional identities based on financial success, home ownership, marriage, blue-collar muscles, and procreation. The theme is prominent in Mark Sampson’s hilarious collection of short stories *The Secrets Men Keep*, James Grainger’s hipster thriller *Harmless*, and Sean Trinder’s *Clerks*-inspired *The Guy Who Pumps Your Gas Hates You*. While all the texts highlight the exploitative nature of temporary, no-benefits work, the characters accept precarity as the new normal and seek to create forms of male identity based on the shared experiences of twenty- and thirty-somethings.

Post-industrial fiction also expresses a heightened aesthetic interest in rusting, crumbling, decaying urban infrastructure. Richard Lloyd documented a similar symbolic process in his study of Chicago’s Wicker Park in the 1990s, *Neo-Bohemia: Art and Commerce in the Postindustrial City*. His interviews with locals revealed that constituents self-consciously interpreted symptoms of urban decay as symbols evidencing the neighbourhood’s bohemian ethos. Lloyd called the symbolic process “grit-as-glamour” and documented how locals saw street-level crime, boarded-

up storefronts, graffiti, and abandoned factories as “symbolic infrastructure” that mythically connected Wicker Park to earlier bohemian enclaves like Greenwich Village, Soho, and Montparnasse. Authors are producing a parallel literary version of grit-as-glamour that is aestheticizing rural and urban spaces in Canada, although without the symbolic connection to older bohemia that Lloyd delineates. In much the same way that earlier authors attempted to describe the Canadian wilderness, writers are now documenting the ruins of post-industrial Canada. Images of abandoned infrastructure that supported secondary industries – resource extraction, manufacturing, shipping – proliferate in texts with rural or extra-urban settings: Donna Besel’s *Lessons from a Nude Man* explores the decrepit motels and shops along the highways on the Canadian Shield that have been discarded during a bust cycle or devastated by more efficient shipping routes. In Kevin Hardcastle’s *Debris* we find similar spaces that have been taken over by the underground economy: former gas stations, bars, and tourists traps now serve as grimy meeting places for bikers, black-market shoppers, and MMA fighters. While such spaces serve as monuments to post-industrial decline, authors seek to capture the beauty of the ruins and the odd contrast produced between crumbling bricks and the encroaching wilderness – or, in urban texts, phalanxes of condos.

Grit-as-glamour assumes two interconnected symbolic forms: one nostalgic, one romantic. In its nostalgic form, grit-as-glamour symbolizes a lost era, a longing for an earlier time when industrialization and resource extraction supported burgeoning, working-class communities. In its romantic form, it transforms the decaying cityscape into the space of new opportunities and community-building. In Christie’s *If I Fall, If I Die* we find both forms: the older generation views Thunder Bay’s rundown shipping yards as a dangerous space that epitomizes the northern city’s struggles, whereas the younger generation views the rusted

industrial district as a romantic site of adventure, reconciliation, and new hope. Grainger's *Harmless* conjures a similar dream-vision: two hipsters visit an abandoned town in the middle of a great forest; the buildings – workshops, logger camps, a general store – are covered with graffiti and invading plants. They envision it as a utopian space – “a self-sustaining community that rewarded participation, hard work, and sacrifice” – and imagine restoring it as a makerspace and marketplace for those who cherish the authentic, local, and organic. In doing so, they see a way to rescue the community from violent biker gangs and to establish a new economic backbone for the northern town on the margins of cottage country.

Grit-as-glamour recovers Northrop Frye's “quest for the peaceable kingdom” – the primary myth that, he proposed, defined the English-Canadian literary tradition up until the centennial years. According to Frye, the wilderness was a pastoral space, an escape to an earlier and more innocent time that could serve as a foundation for English-Canadian culture. Grit-as-glamour uses a related symbolic structure in which urban ruins replace farms and provide a base for building ethical communities that reject the alienation and exploitative capitalism of the new economy. Grit-as-glamour produces a symbolically bridges the nostalgic past, a corrupt present, and a romantic future. The widespread appearance of grit-as-glamour suggests that some authors are breathing new life into old myths while creating radically new, transnational aesthetics that can mediate the disruptions and opportunities presented by the era of post-industrialism.

Experimental Fiction

Anakana Schofield's *Martin John* is an outstanding debut novel that experiments with pathos by creating a disturbing character who provokes uncomfortable ambivalence in the

reader. Martin John struggles to repress powerful but inappropriate sexual urges. After fleeing Ireland because of a scandal, Martin attempts to make a new life in London with the help of his “mam,” who stays in Ireland, and his aunt, who checks in on Martin once a week. The novel explores three issues: Will Martin control his sexual perversions? Will Martin survive on his own? What did Martin do in Ireland?

The novel focalizes Martin’s and mam’s perspectives, producing an interesting formal experiment. The strategy results in heightened and, at times, darkly hilarious prose as Martin attempts to control his perversions. He has a tendency to think in the passive voice (“Harm was done and further harm would be done”), dislikes words that start with *p* so much that he tries to omit them, and consistently uses ambiguous pronouns (“*It* was never defined”). His mam also establishes rules and schedules he must follow to stay out of trouble and to avoid interacting with the public. While it is ambiguous whether mam writes the rules in letters or whether Martin is imagining her advice, they dramatize how he manically attempts to repress dangerous thoughts. He can’t control himself and is aware that “meddlers” – everyday people – condemn his desire to flash, grope, and masturbate in public. Yet, Martin contends that “meddlers” simply cannot comprehend his problem, and Schofield’s use of narrative consistently places the reader in an awkward position where he or she is ambivalently torn between empathy and repulsion. The ambiguity heightens the tension as the reader is denied access to the victims’ experiences, a choice that further obfuscates the physical and psychological harm Martin exposes unsuspecting Londoners to.

These thematic and formal characteristics are part of a broader experiment with pathos, catharsis, and other key features of tragedy – Martin evokes conflicting feelings of pity, sympathy, and disgust. Indeed, the majority of the novel details the elaborate means he applies to

mitigate his compulsions and minimize temptations. Martin spends all his energy and waking hours attempting to control himself: it leaves him psychologically damaged and exhausted. As he begins to break down, he seeks greater and more dangerous forms of satisfaction, ranging from refusing to urinate because the pressure feels good to sexually assaulting a girl, maybe a teenager, on the subway. Yet, his potentially heroic effort to overcome his pathological perversion is complicated by Martin's and mam's lack of guilt: they seem incapable of sympathizing with the victims. Rather, their actions are intended to preserve Martin's freedom and safety: they fear imprisonment or death through mob justice. From such a perspective, Martin's heroism is reduced to a form of self-preservation: he must avoid sexually assaulting someone and, if need be, avoid getting caught.

Jess Taylor's *Pauls* is a work of uncanny beauty – an artwork that is familiar and delightfully alien because its originality challenges the boundaries of the existing genres and aesthetics that one can draw on to make sense of it all. Taylor's aesthetic embraces pondering: elliptical trajectories that briefly pursue a moment of imagination only to return to the central narrative arc. Sometimes characters' thoughts spark unexpected divergences; other times they are epistolary, and, occasionally, they manifest through the digressions of an unknown, omniscient narrator. The forays effect a sense of floating wonderment that blurs narrative time while exposing the essence of the characters through their dreamlike musings – like an actor standing in a cone of spotlight on a dark stage.

This key characteristic of a Jess Taylor story is perhaps best epitomized by the collection's unifying novelty: each story is about a different Paul, and several stories feature many Pauls. Each Paul is an individual, but the Pauls gradually become an odd whole because of the simple fact that they are presented side by side for contemplation – a paratextual experiment

with the genre of the short story collection. The first story, “Paul,” also heightens the impact of the device as it records all the Pauls who live in a small town, features a girl who lists all the Pauls (real and fictional) that she knows, and includes a magical ending where the girl and a cat watch two Pauls embrace in a clearing in the woods that, it seems, may have the marvellous ability to clear people’s heads.

In a Jess Taylor story, repetition and digression lead to epiphany. In “Claire’s Fine,” the protagonist is unaware that she is suffering from depression and she suppresses her trauma originating from news stories about an outbreak of sexual assaults at the nearby university campus. At the story’s ending, we find this paragraph, visually isolated from the conclusion:

Fine is a funny word. The weather can be fine. There can be fine stitching on clothes. Fine can mean small, contained, delicate. Fine can mean okay, all right. Comme ci, comme ça. When someone asks, How are you? You can say, Fine, and mean the opposite, or you can mean, I am like a careful line of stitching, how are you? You can mean, I am delicate. Be careful that I don’t get snagged and unravel.

Claire lives with Nathan and Paul. Both men seem to love her or, at least, want to sleep with her. They are stuck in a loop where every night they drink, smoke, and cuddle. They keep asking Claire how’s she doing and she says, “Fine.” The news stories about the assaults and the shocking statistics do not affect Nathan or Paul – they don’t care. The guys focus only on their competing desires: they snag Claire and are unable to recognize why she is unravelling.

Carol Daniels’s *Bearskin Diary* documents the systemic racism experienced by Indigenous Canadians born in the 1960s and the protagonist’s quest to recover her identity. It is set two decades after the Sixties Scoop in which federal and provincial governments removed

Indigenous children from their families and placed them for adoption within the foster care system. Tens of thousands of children were displaced, which exposed them to exploitation and severed their cultural ties. Sandy was “lucky” in that the Scoop placed her with a loving foster family; we first meet her as a twenty-something with a budding television journalism career. Sandy’s quest is to rediscover her identity and overcome the shame she feels as a result of widespread and openly hostile racism in 1980s Saskatchewan.

The chapters are a collection of short vignettes that resemble third-person journal entries. The narrative is fascinating because it blends journalistic reportage with the intimacy of a diary entry while also using the hero’s quest to structure the overarching plot. The narrative structure is impactful because it fully develops the characters as complicated, empathetic people while also subtly presenting everyday events as integral parts of Sandy’s epic journey. The formal structure mirrors how racism transforms Sandy’s everyday life into a larger battle for cultural survival and equal rights: as the first indigenous television journalist in Canada, her actions are of great consequence because she serves as a representative of all First Nations in a highly public forum. Sandy struggles with these responsibilities because she knows little about her culture owing to the Scoop but works the First Nations beat for the news program.

A cast of secondary characters assist and frustrate Sandy’s quest for cultural reclamation. Ellen is a lifelong girlfriend who helps Sandy recover from heartbreak and the novel’s surprising climax. Kyle is a white photojournalist who reintroduces Sandy to her Indigenous heritage and helps her reunite with relatives. Joe is an elder who guides Sandy on her quest and helps expose the police’s role in sexually assaulting and, potentially, murdering Indigenous women. Blue, the first Indigenous person to join Saskatchewan’s police force, serves as a quasi-villain. The couple have a brief if turbulent love affair. There are also a series of racist white and Indigenous

characters who correspondingly degrade Sandy for being “Indian” or for integrating into white culture. The balance of supporting and hostile characters allows the story to remain grounded and maintain a sense of immediacy rather than escaping into a romance with idealized but cardboard characters.

One of the most interesting aspects of *Bearskin Diary* regards how Sandy’s world view changes as she embraces her Indigenous identity. The novel begins as a realist text, and Sandy rationalizes events using logic – a trend that is emphasized through her work as a journalist. However, as she reconnects with Indigenous traditions, she begins to accept spirits into her life. Originally, she dismisses her intuition, dreams, and visions as signs of psychological distress but then slowly realizes they are part of a spiritualism that she has long suppressed. As she becomes increasingly conscious of her new spirituality, events that Westerners dismiss as nonsense become an essential part of her ontology. The shift from realism to magical realism is so gradual that it may escape notice. Yet, it facilitates one of the novel’s most important themes regarding the decolonization of Sandy’s identity and consciousness.

Jean Marc Ah-Sen’s *Grand Menteur* is a diasporic crime novel where the intrigue is so ambiguous that it destabilizes the difference between fact and fiction. The novel chronicles the history of a Mauritian street gang from the 1940s to 1980 as they found new chapters across the globe, especially in major hubs for transatlantic trade. It is narrated by the daughter of the Grand Menteur, who attempts to free his family from gang life and is punished by being assigned smuggling duties for about a decade. The narrator is sent to live with distant relatives in Toronto, where gangsters keep encouraging her to join owing to her unique talents for violence. In her possession is the Sous Gang’s codex, a half-manual, half-history of the group’s accomplishments, membership, codes of conduct, and vendettas.

Ah-Sen synthesizes elements of diasporic narrative and crime fiction. Disconnected from her family, the narrator seeks to forge an identity through the codex, unreliable memories, and fantasies about her deceased mother. The chapters are disjointed, moving back and forth through time and space. The structure results in much obfuscation: while the characters are vibrantly described, their actions and motivations remain cryptic. The narrator and reader struggle to comprehend what actually happened: what crimes were committed, how, and why. In a postmodern fashion, the more information one receives, the less one understands what precisely the Sous Gang does. The ambiguity is expressionistic, an experiment that hyperbolizes the narrator's feelings of loss, confusion, and loneliness resulting from her migration to Canada and years separated from her father. It is a fascinating twist on a common feature of diasporic writing in which characters negotiate connections between "there" – the family's homeland – and "here" – the family's new home – to forge a hybrid identity. In the case of *Grand Menteur*, ethnicity and nationality, which are commonly associated with "there," are replaced with the codex – the gang's fables, legends, and customs. The narrator achieves an identity as a storyteller at the novel's conclusion: she is appointed their Grand Archiviste, and it is her father's gift to her: "To bear witness, and to give account, through the privilege of a tourist, of the life of the small-time and its heathen impedimenta. Go forth, knowing thyself a sear imitation of a woman, daughter of a tarradiddling island rover, with the shame of things to come tailing behind her."

Post-Industrial Fiction

Michael Christie's *If I Fall, If I Die* is a great Canadian urban novel; like other canonical texts, such as Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* and Dionne Brand's *What We All Long*

For, Christie's novel imaginatively captures the changing cityscape and challenges readers to rethink their relationship to urban spaces and places. It offers a new, exciting story that explores how globalization is modifying Canadian communities – the challenges it presents but also the new opportunities it opens up – by focusing on two youths who negotiate their relationship to Thunder Bay's post-industrial cityscape through skateboarding and fighting crime. It notably shifts the focus away from Canada's metropolises to a smaller urban centre, and considers how creative reuse of the urban environment can reconcile Indigenous and other Canadians.

If I Fall, If I Die is one of the most imaginative and entertaining works of literature penned in recent years. The story depicts Will's embrace of "Outside" after spending his early years inside his family's home: his single mother, Diane, is agoraphobic and traumatophobic – her twin brother was killed in an industrial accident while working in Thunder Bay's shipyards. The years of isolation have left Will fearful of the unsafe and terrifying Outside, but they have also helped him to develop a curious and empathetic imagination. He resembles other young adult characters such as Anne of Green Gables and Pi Patel in his creativity, genuine good nature, and naïveté. The opening chapters are particularly delightful owing to Will's innocence and the humorous use of structural irony: by channelling Will's perspective, Christie reimagines mundane environments – the backyard, the neighbourhood street, an adjacent forest – as marvellous spaces that stimulate a sense of wonderment and surprise. The structural irony is also hilarious as it emphasizes that the dangers Will encounters Outside are, from the reader's perspective, pedestrian. At first, we know that he will remain safe and sound: we appreciate his unique experience of Thunder Bay but also laugh at his tendency to imagine threats lurking behind every bush.

As Will matures and realizes that Outside is not as threatening as his mother suggested, the novel slowly but appropriately morphs into a crime-solving romance. Will forms a bond with Jonah as they become skateboarding buddies and attempt to find Marcus – a mutual friend who has disappeared. Skateboarding is the novel’s central metaphor: it facilitates Will’s awareness that we learn by confronting our fears and that we should be proud of our bruises as they testify to a willingness to take risks, learn, and improve. This ethos helps Will to become an excellent skateboarder, build friendships with Indigenous children – whom other white characters perceive as threatening – and explore Thunder Bay’s decaying industrial cityscape, which is associated with bootlegging, human trafficking, and the decline of the city’s working class. Skateboarding teaches Will to be fearless, and he uses that new knowledge to bust up a crime ring that threatens the population and prevents the city’s rejuvenation.

If I Fall, If I Die also innovates the two-generation narrative that is common to urban writing in Canada: it is a prominent structure in immigrant fiction in which the older generation struggles to adapt to Canadian life and, owing to their sacrifices, the younger generation is able to thrive. Will’s parents are the sacrificial victims of post-industrialization: the manufacturing and shipping sectors provided them with a livable income even if the work was inherently dangerous (Will’s uncle did die in the shipping yards); yet these industries were later devastated by globalization and automation, leaving behind a wasteland of derelict infrastructure and a generation of unemployed workers. Before her breakdown, Diane was an award-winning artist who documented the post-industrial landscape through nostalgic images: “empty taverns, derelict train cars, abandoned bicycles, crude underpass graffiti, broken people milling around Greyhound stations, all of it – she wouldn’t realize until later – somehow touched by decay.” In contrast, Will and Jonah reimagine the decaying cityscape as the new frontier, where they build

diverse communities in abandoned buildings and renegotiate their sense of place through skateboarding. Their love affair with the cityscape serves as a broader metaphor for the experiences of young people who live in small urban centres who are reinvigorating their cities with creativity, curiosity, risk-taking, and empathy.

James Grainger's *Harmless* is a post-industrial romance that undertakes a disturbing exploration and critique of masculinity in the post-millennium years. A group of hipsters retreat to a friend's farm for a reunion. During a night of booze, dope, and adultery, two teenage daughters go missing in the surrounding bush, populated by a legendary commune of vets-turned-hippie-rapists and/or thuggish drug dealers. The adults are unsure whether the girls have gone out partying, got lost on a walk, or, worse, been abducted by the maybe-mythic vets. The two fathers, Joseph (the protagonist) and Alex, venture into the wilderness hoping to save the girls despite being afflicted with a severe case of paranoia-inducing green out. Adding to the tension is Joseph's uncertainty whether Alex had stumbled on him earlier in the evening when he was having sex with Jane – who is married to Alex. The two potential enemies head into the pitch-black woods armed with a powerful rifle (Alex) and a serious but hidden knife (Joseph); the literary thrills begin.

While the status of *Harmless* as an entertaining page-turner cannot be understated, the novel offers a timely critique of masculinity. The male characters struggle with their identities because their experience as men does not resemble those of earlier generations. They are unable to fulfill the “traditional” male role as a protective breadwinner because they are precariously employed. Joseph feels further emasculated because his body does not conform to idealized images of masculinity: his career as a cultural commenter/scenester has left him with a slight belly and little endurance beyond the twenty minutes required for sex. Alex is the romantic. He

moves his family to the hosting farm, where he owns a struggling carpentry business and attempts to revitalize the small town's economy through his hipster gaze by encouraging locals to play up their crumbling downtown as a tourist retreat for urbanites craving authenticity. The two competing forms of hipster masculinity – one urban, self-destructive, and sardonic; the other rural, nostalgic, and romantic – are compared but never privileged. The quest to save their daughters from dangers, real and imagined, forces the men to prove that they are, indeed, men.

The narrative is disturbing because it focalizes Joseph's perspective: he continually interprets the present through the cultural narratives and critical theory archived in his brain. He imagines himself and others as characters in novels, films, or videos and simultaneously deconstructs the mediated present as if it were the subject of a highbrow cultural news show. The device transforms the thriller into a critique of our hypermediated world, especially narratives that glorify violent forms of masculinity. He obsessively imagines the vets raping the teenage girls and explains how the hypothetical assaults are the logical consequence of masses of emasculated men living in a world saturated in hard-core pornography. He believes that porn has led many men to believe that the only way to be masculine is to inflict violence on powerless girls – a fantasy, it seems, he may indulge in from time to time. However, his perspective changes when the fathers stumble on a well-built shack in the middle of the woods: inside, teenage boys masturbate to a self-produced video that they also sell on the black market, which features the gang rape of a minor. While watching outside, Joseph loses control, charges in gun a-blazing, and shouts, "That's my daughter!" over and over again. Later, Alex points out that the line was hilarious because it re-enacted a scene from *Hardcore* – the 1979 crime drama about a man who tries to find his missing daughter, who, it turns out, has been starring in adult films. The scenes in the woods are troubling because of the graphic description of sexual assault and

the degree to which almost everything Joseph thinks and does is recycled from popular culture. The evening's events force him to reconcile fantasies with real-world consequences. The result is a significant literary accomplishment that draws critical attention to the crime, thriller, and suspense motifs that make *Harmless* such a difficult book to stop reading. As the title suggests, popular male fantasies may not be as harmless as they are too often proclaimed to be.

Kevin Hardcastle's *Debris* includes eleven stories that recover and rejuvenate old themes about survival in Canada's rough-and-tough rural spaces. Despite the connection to the past, the tales are thoroughly contemporary as they spin yarns about the creative ways thugs, criminals, vigilantes, and MMA athletes make a living in hollowed-out frontiers. The aesthetic might reasonably be labelled "post-industrial noir" as the plots veer toward violence and feature hard-boiled characters who face difficult decisions. Yet, the tales are grounded; the concrete prose presents the action in an imagistic manner. While there's enough action for a summer's worth of blockbuster films, the stories remain character driven, and Hardcastle's play with language distinguishes his tales from popcorn pushers.

The stories showcase the creativity of regional accents; however, they seem derived from westerns and caper flicks rather than committed to documentary regionalism. The narrators' diction establishes the rules of the fictional frontiers, where unnecessary violence is an everyday or, at the very least, an unsurprising occurrence. Consider a narrator's description of his birthday snowmobile ride with his blinkered-drunk, shotgun-firing family in "Bandits":

There was a storm coming from the north and you could see the black clouds rolling even against the lesser black of the moonlit sky. Thunder from the heavens and did it ever fucking boom. Next came bolts of white-blue lightning. Smell of electric all over. The snow came down heavy. It looked to me like the

end of the world. We passed between two fishing huts and crossed to the other side of the bay, close to the big houses and cottages planted there. Most of them were empty for the season. They were summer homes for people from the city or second houses for the richest in town. Pa throttled down and so did we all. Crept up rumbling aside a fine cedar-wood house with great bay windows, boathouse half as big as our actual house.

This economical passage is packed with images and symbols that foreshadow the story's conflict: the family unleashes a crime spree that victimizes their wealthy neighbours and nearby stores during blizzards – the snow, of course, hides their tracks. After a few successful months of banditry, most of the family is gunned down and drowned by the police – execution style.

In the third-person stories, violence is presented in a straightforward style that mirrors the characters' acceptance of pain and misery as expected facets of life. "Montana Border" includes several scenes depicting MMA fights and the protagonist's long, post-battle drives across state and national borders. Describing the protagonist's last return voyage, Hardcastle writes:

He drove back into Lethbridge not twelve hours later and he'd done it with only his left hand. He couldn't make a fist with the other. Part of an incisor buried in the meat between his first two knuckles. There were scratch marks by his eyes and left cheek as if he'd gone through a hedgerow blind. Otherwise Daniel was whole and bang awake when he pulled into Sarah's drive.

The mundane description of violence becomes humorous owing to the use of "otherwise" to introduce notion that Daniel was "whole," despite being beaten up, and "bang awake," despite experiencing concussion symptoms. The characters, though, express an overwhelming sense of fatalism, especially the notion that violence is the only means of survival for males. "Montana

Border” ends with Sarah asking whether Daniel will train their child to fight if it’s a boy, to which he responds, “I damn well hope not.”

Debris represents an exciting new contribution to Canadian literature that recovers and synthesizes many traditionally important themes for a post-industrial world. The characters and plots seem transplanted from the modern realism of the 1920s–1940s, in which gangs gunned each other down in Morley Callaghan’s and Hugh Garner’s Toronto, or labourers risked their lives to make a living in Canada’s rapidly industrializing cities and on its resource-rich frontiers. Like their earlier counterparts, Hardcastle’s characters accept as unavoidable the poverty and violence that saturate their lives. Yet, the stories are distinctly rural as they grapple with how the decline of resource industries and their steady incomes is encouraging people to turn to the underground economy controlled by biker gangs: survival on the post-industrial frontier.

The stories in Donna Besel’s *Lessons from a Nude Man* portray the everyday experiences of women and their families living in northern communities. They update some of the old themes and preoccupations of Canadian fiction by considering how northern communities are changing, especially those in Manitoba and Ontario. Her female protagonists are socially isolated and struggle to make a living in the economically depressed north.

Told with crisp realism, the prose evokes the harshness of the north. Rather than focusing on the rugged wilderness, the images contrast waves of economic development: rusty, abandoned buildings are juxtaposed with the new summer homes of city dwellers. This theme, which appears in many stories, is emphasized in “Hawksley Workman and the Worst Motel in Canada.” The story shares the experience of a single mother and her two teens as they drive home from a lavish wedding on a friend’s “island estate” in Port Perry; they decide to explore the region but find only a landscape of economic decline: “The scenery had changed to rough, swampy areas

alternating with rough, rocky areas, much different from the ‘Group of Seven’ topography I expected. Resort cabins and motels popped up among sparse towns and frequent lakes, but they looked deserted, rundown – Tom Thompson’s nightmares, perhaps.” Without a particular destination in mind, they end up renting the only room they can find, in a sketchy motel populated by truckers and prostitutes. The infrastructure is dilapidated, and the mouse-infested room reeks of urine. Rubble covers the floor. The widow breaks down: the room and their long trip from Manitoba to Ontario and back expose their relative poverty after her husband’s death. Yet, she recovers by identifying with the mother and daughter who operate the motel. The story is representative of the broader collection because of its heightened emphasis on the theme: the unspoken kinship shared by women who endure the north.

Romantic and Speculative Fiction

Andrew Battershill’s *Pillow* is a fun literary crime novel about a washed-up boxer dabbling in organized crime who tries one final score to fund a new life for his family-to-be. The distinction between genre and literary fiction has been called into question the last couple of years in publications spanning the *Guardian*, *New Yorker*, *Esquire*, and even *Vice*; *Pillow* is precisely the sort of novel that complicates too easy distinctions between lowbrow and highbrow forms: the plot and characters are the product of tried-and-true genre structures, yet *Pillow* includes so many innovative formal features that it is a noteworthy work of experimental fiction.

After falling in love and accidentally impregnating his neighbour, *Pillow* aspires to graduate from hired muscle to scheming thief, hoping to earn enough from a single score to go clean. When some rare, stolen coins are jacked during a deal, two corrupt cops, competing

surrealist mobsters, and Pillow try to track them down with the hope of selling them on the black market. Much of the fun originates from all the lying, double-crossing, and unexpected murdering that forces the parties to shift allegiances. The integration of the surrealist mobsters – Andre Breton, Gwynn Apollinaire, Louise Aragon, and Georges Bataille – introduces brilliant novelty to the crime genre by hyperbolizing the psychopathy of avant-garde artists and criminals alike. The chaos perpetrated by the mobsters and their overwhelming lack of empathy offer an interesting contrast to Pillow’s unpredictability and charming good nature. Pillow is not the most intelligent person; he also suffers from several concussions that significantly impair his cognitive abilities, balance, and ability to stay awake. The surrealists unleash deliberate forms of madness, violence, and chaos on the world; Pillow does so as well, but unintentionally.

Battershill uses structural irony to narrate the story from Pillow’s perspective and to heighten the confusion caused by past and present concussions. By focalizing Pillow’s consciousness, the narrative further confuses the many lies he tells to fool his competitors and hide his illegal activities from his lover, Emily. The narrative is satirical because it hyperbolizes the plots of heist and con movies like *Reservoir Dogs*, *Get Shorty*, *Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, and the *Ocean’s* franchise – at times, even Pillow struggles to negotiate the multiple layers of intrigue. Such moments are simultaneously humorous and pathetic as they play with the core features of genre fiction while also creating pathos that allow readers to sympathize with Pillow’s suffering. The latter characteristic also relates to one of the novel’s key themes: the tragic life of exploited athletes and others who suffer from traumatic brain injury. Pillow was a champion boxer, but his career has left him chronically punch drunk; similarly, his schemes result in additional concussions that threaten his life. The novel is by no means didactic, but the theme is certainly noteworthy as professional sport leagues are facing class-action lawsuits and

research is allowing us to better understand the debilitating effects of multiple concussions.

Pillow is a tragic figure because he believes he can outsmart seasoned crooks and cops despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Jon Chan Simpson's *Chinkstar* marks a highly original contribution to Canadian literature. This urban romance is set in Red Deer, which threatens to be torn apart by rival gangs: the Chinese-Canadian Apes and the "old stock" Necks. The title refers to the leader of the Chimps, King Kwong, who pioneers chinksta, a new hip hop genre that combines gangsta-infused, new school poetics with the lived experiences of Chinese and, more broadly, Asian Canadians. The novel is narrated by King Kwong's younger brother, Run, and features the sibling's search for the Chinkstar, who mysteriously disappears forty-eight hours before his sold-out debut stadium show in Vancouver – a gig that promises to launch an international career and secure all the bling and notoriety that accompanies it.

Chinkstar is a forty-eight-hour *Bildungsroman* that portrays Run Kwong's exploration and acceptance of his multi-ethnic identity. At first, he rejects his brother's music and lifestyle but is partially attracted to the "movement," the gang's quest to place Chineseness at the centre of Canadian life through crime and rhyme. But as he searches for his brother, he not only showcases his lyrical talents but also secures a leadership position in the movement as he develops his street cred and finds ways to reconcile the warring factions. His initial ambivalence introduces a needed ironic perspective that critically reflects on how Chi-rhyme appropriates African-American poetics, reclaims racial slurs, and romanticizes violence and misogyny. The early irony, however, is partially mitigated by the novel's romanticism and escapist plot. Yet, the combination effectively eases readers into an over-the-top world and complements the novel's themes of reconciliation and belonging.

Chinkstar may prove a challenging read, especially to those unfamiliar with hip hop. But it is worth working through the novel, perhaps with the aid of a search engine. The prose continually alienates and welcomes, and one's experience is determined by one's subjectivity. The heavy use of slang, neologisms, and references to Chinese culture is simultaneously inclusive and exclusive. There is a large cohort of young Canadians who will love the novel's urbanity and genuine love affair with rap; indeed, if Canadian fiction is to remain relevant to millennials and the next generation (whatever name we coin for them), we need more books like *Chinkstar*. However, older readers may find the content and lyricism alienating and, at times, hard to follow. Simpson "writes back" to the dominant population: if you were able to groove to Leonard Cohen or Amiri Baraka, you should be able to crib, or, err, Ape, to *Chinkstar*. Indeed, it is difficult not to rap along to the novel's lyrical scenes regardless of one's lack of rhythm or talent; the rhymes are so well constructed that anyone can MC with the imaginary b-boys, DJs, and ballers who populate Simpson's Red Deer.

Chinkstar deserves praise for its risk-taking and boundary-pushing experimentation. It freshens a Canlit genre of Canadian literature that has become a little too redundant. By synthesizing contemporary urban culture with the tired-but-true three-generation structure of the immigrant narrative, Simpson has produced a novel that demands attention and solidifies the author's lit cred. To quote the now obscure Mike Bullard, *Chinkstar* may seem like a "drive by shouting," but the novel's aesthetic and thematic content challenges such knee-jerk and racist reactions so that we may imagine new forms of transnational belonging that mirror a younger, globalized, and multi-ethnic Canada.

The short stories collected in R.W. Gray's *Entropic* are beautiful experiments that combine aspects of expressionism and speculative fiction. Gray imagines worlds that are similar

to ours, but the rules have been slightly altered through the introduction of surrealist scenarios. In “Mirror Ball” a gay couple meet younger versions of themselves, causing the lovers to test their boundaries and commitments; in “Entropic” a man of uncanny beauty arranges the induction of brief comas so that selected guests may have a turn to do whatever they want to his unconscious body. The *Entropic* stories use surrealist motifs to explore characters’ psychologies, particularly their longing for reciprocated love. Gray’s characters are often defeated and numb, causing a fascinating contrast between their sedated responses and extraordinary occurrences.

“Entropic” is the collection’s most challenging and rewarding story. The protagonist receives an unexpected email from M—, an unnamed man whose “beauty is unmanageable.” M— explains that he can no longer cope with the longings of others: everywhere he goes people stare at him as if possessed, find sneaky ways to smell his body, or outright grope his chiselled muscles. M— feels a responsibility to indulge people, to share his beauty; yet it leaves him exhausted and depressed because “when people begin with his beauty, anything he says or does disappoints.” Even the narrator, who loves M—, struggles to pay attention and truly listen to what the beautiful man has to say. To liberate himself, M— rents a warehouse where visitors are granted forty minutes with his body. The narrator’s job is to facilitate the meetings, clean M—’s body after each session, monitor the flow of drugs, and watch to ensure M—’s safety. After several days of exhibiting himself, M— will disappear forever. The narrator is the lovesick witness who cannot look away and is unable to imagine a future without M—’s presence. Gray introduces the fantastical to heighten the emotional and intellectual effect of his stories; in the case of “Entropic,” each visit serves as a meditation on the sublime incarnated and the ways it stimulates powerful feelings of lust, violence, horror, envy, sadness, comfort, stupor, and love.

The stories mark a highly original contribution to Canadian literature and are distinguished by their aesthetically rewarding experimentalism.

Welcome to the Circus is an apt title for Rhonda Douglas's collection of short stories: like a circus, the collection displays diverse curiosities. Douglas takes readers to a Newfoundland school during the Quebec referendum, a porno emporium threatened by violent protesters in Saskatchewan, a humanitarian camp in Dadaab, and a museum with a real, live "Neandertal." We never know what to expect from story to story, which makes *Welcome to the Circus* a rewarding read.

Despite the diversity of settings, characters, and novelties, the stories are united by a playful experimentalism. Douglas continually toys with narrative, typography, and structure to discover new ways of telling stories and exploring themes. For example, "Love Notes for Eighth Grade" is a series of notes written in the second person for the author's eighth-grade self. With typical humour, the first entry is a spoiler alert warning the youth about a series of forthcoming hardships: "It works out okay for you, this life thing. Seen from a two-decade distance, you are such an awkward tumbleweed girl, careening through fourteen: your dad's affairs, divorce, a move to the boonies, death in the family, brother off the rails, new school, assholes abounding – this is adolescence." The narrative perspective and dark jokes produce an efficient irony that shows how the events change both versions of the author's self. "Cancer Oratorio" is an opera with eighteen movements; each song portrays the choir's struggle to maintain their membership and composure after losing three performers to cancer and discovering a fourth fatal diagnosis. The title of each movement inflects the narrative structure and tone; the sixth movement is a mezzo-soprano solo, and Douglas uses short, declarative sentences to invoke the operatic form in prose: "Oh God, poor Davis. He isn't good with stress like this; his eczema will act up. I should

call him or send him something. But what?” Another section, “The Organ,” captures the feeling of the instrument: “Vibrations of love: she perched in the front row of altos. Her skinny knees or a part of her calf always touching me to feel the vibrations. The music flowing through us. Wind through the metal pipes, the pulsing wooden seat-boards of the choir pews.” It is a sad story. Douglas’s experiments with form heighten the pathos and evoke the different ways the voices come together and separate to make sense of tragedy.

In Katherine Fawcett’s *The Little Washer of Sorrows*, otherwise ordinary people encounter and accept fantastical intrusions into their everyday lives. The stories have some magical realist tendencies, like the characters in Gabriel García Márquez’s “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings.” Fawcett’s protagonists embrace marvellous intrusions with an odd mix of compassion and an eye for exploitation. Yet, the stories have more in common with speculative fiction as the characters do not inhabit societies where the magical and fantastical are expected, everyday occurrences, and, like parables, the narratives often use allegory and dark comedy to critique contemporary society. The parody of romance forms produces an entertaining collection of nineteen very short stories that are sure to satisfy any hankering for whimsy – fairy tales for adults.

The title of each story invites the reader into a world of magic and allegory. The collection is named after an Irish banshee whose wail is a harbinger of death. “Captcha,” an acronym for a test to distinguish AI from humans, is about Margo, who discovers she is a Stepford wife. “Lenny and the Polyamphibians” tells a tale about a man who finds and raises a tiny mermaid in his bathtub. And “Siren Sisters” portrays a family rift between a siren who wants to continue the family tradition of murdering sailors and her siblings, who would rather have sex with and, perhaps, marry the seamen. By immediately establishing the rules of the

magical parallels to our contemporary world, Fawcett foregrounds the relationships among the characters, and the fantastical elements facilitate reflections on love, family, tradition, and gender; more often than not, Fawcett lampoons various incarnations of these themes to take issue with widespread misogyny.

Laugh-out-loud humour emerges from the interplay between speculative motifs and a burlesque of contemporary mores. “Johnny Longsword’s Third Option” features a stripper who does not realize that he is stuck in purgatory – his actual name is Lionel Littlehorn. He’s overly rude to St. Peter and the billions of souls waiting for admission to heaven or hell. Ignorant of mythology, and overly reliant on clichéd language, Johnny says many unfortunate things, such as calling St. Peter a “Dickwad” and quipping, “I’d like to know who died and put *that* tight-ass in charge.” Fawcett satirizes Johnny’s earthly obsessions – *Facebook* posts, heavy metal music (ironically AC/DC’s *Highway to Hell*), and his new partner, whom he met at a stagette. She also burlesques the afterlife by presenting it as an unhelpful, cold-hearted, and overly complex bureaucracy. Rather than truly engaging with “customers,” St. Peter repeats bureaucratic nonsense: “The data I receive is being continually modified. Your name does not currently appear in any form. You will have to wait here until Update. After Inventory. [...] It’s policy. I’m sure you understand.” While the story dramatizes Johnny’s short time in purgatory, the speculative elements lampoon everyday encounters that *feel* like purgatory, such as engaging with institutional and individual forms of unnecessarily annoying jerkdom.

Comedic and Ironic Fiction

What is it like to be a middle-aged millennial? This is the primary theme Mark Sampson considers in his first collection of short stories, *The Secrets Men Keep*. In it, we find thirty-somethings toiling in unfulfilling service-industry jobs, embracing marriage, overcoming divorce, and grieving deaths. While thinking of millennials as thirty-somethings may surprise or cause an existential crisis, Sampson's stories offer compelling counter-narratives that debunk widespread and ageist myths that the mass media has perpetuated for the last ten years – ten years! – claiming that millennials are entitled, lazy, and immature. Sampson finds humour in the universal moments that define adulthood regardless of the decade in which one hit one's mid-thirties; the characters deal with the same problems as their parents but in a different historical setting: economically depressed Canada in the early twenty-first century.

Sampson has a talent for telling humorous tales. "The Man Room" is an exceptionally funny story about Donald, who works at the GO Train station while his lover is completing her dissertation. It weaves two plots together that document Donald's changing sense of masculinity: one involves finding a dead hawk stuck to a grille of a train, which he transforms into a monumental decoration for his Man Room; the other involves Donald's role in capturing a home invader who has been victimizing their Toronto neighbourhood for months. Donald is a bit of a goof. He blows the family's savings on taxidermy and struggles to conceptualize why he finds the hawk so majestic; he redesigns the basement into a Man Room where his blue-collar buddies congress to discuss things they can't in front of their wives: their precarious employment, love for UFC, enthusiasm for gaming, and politics. While the Man Room may seem ridiculous – with its eclectic collection of boyish knick-knacks and craft beers – when the time comes, he's able to abandon Xbox controller and whisky snifter at a moment's notice to apprehend the notorious criminal – who is distracted by the hawk when he sneaks into the basement. Donald's decisions

may appear absurd, but they showcase his humanity, especially his struggle to find a place in a world that is dismissive and, at times, hostile toward innocent expressions of masculinity. Many of the comedies use a similar strategy: Sampson initially presents his protagonists as ridiculous but always finds a way to invert what at first seems a satirized character flaw into an admirable trait.

The second major theme Sampson's stories ponder regards the impact of the Great Recession on millennials. Few characters enjoy permanent employment; many work from contract to contract with long periods of unemployment. The experience is near universal as blue-collar workers and those with terminal degrees struggle to find consistent work that provides enough stability for a mortgage and family. While the stories draw attention to widespread exploitation, Sampson focuses on dramatizing how the gig economy affects the characters' sense of self and their relationships with friends and family: a professional hacker is dismissed as unambitious by his working-class father; a high school teacher struggles to make a difference through his drama class; a mid-career writer recognizes that he'll never receive the money, pomp, and support lavished on a mediocre boomer writer. The characters accept economic hardship as the new norm; they are not defeated – rather, Sampson identifies the bittersweet ironies of everyday family life in the new millennium.

Wasela Hiyate's *Travel Is So Broadening* is an accomplished debut collection of short stories about establishing a sense of self and finding love in a globalized world. They portray transnational twenty-somethings in a diverse range of settings spanning Canada, the United States, Trinidad and Tobago, Mexico, and Thailand. One of the collection's most appealing traits is its ability to represent such disparate locales with a sense of intimacy that brings the settings to life by focusing on the characters' actions rather than offering descriptions of cityscape that

channel the tourist's gaze. Equally impressive is Hiyate's cast of diverse characters; she evokes how their pasts, presents, and futures have been shaped by the events of the stories. Despite the diversity in terms of character and setting, the collection remains tightly focused on how globalization impacts identity, family, and home through multiple and, at times, conflicting perspectives.

Each story establishes a gap between the protagonist's expectations and the realities of the social setting. "The Boston Wedding" features a couple – Theresa and Paul – who contemplate matrimony as they attend the nuptials of one of Paul's Harvard classmates. They crash at the apartment of Paul's ex; by the end of the story, the relationship falls apart with Paul reuniting with the ex, and Theresa hooking up with the roommate. The story focalizes Theresa's perspective and highlights how her class, blackness, and education isolate her during the festivities, populated by elite white Americans. Theresa realizes that she and Paul are not in love, that they merely maintain their relationship out of convenience. The story is oddly ironic and, from a certain perspective, optimistic owing to the sense of mundaneness that saturates the narrative; the strategy heightens Theresa's boredom with the relationship and presents the separation of a mixed-race couple as a normal event.

Other stories use similar forms of irony to reflect on the mismatch between an idealistic cosmopolitanism and the lived experiences of the global underclass. "Mo" is written in the tradition of Austin Clarke's "Canadian Experience" and Rohinton Mistry's "Squatter" as it uses structural irony to portray Mo's attempt to assimilate within Canadian culture. Mo, a Muslim who migrated from Pakistan, misunderstands social situations because of his optimistic belief in multiculturalism and emerging understanding of English and Canadianisms. He mistakes racist encounters with whites for positive experiences that testify to Canada's celebration of diversity,

inclusion, and civil society; these are juxtaposed with touching moments of genuine acceptance and other humorous misinterpretations. “Jaime and Alice” features a Mexican who falls in love with his ESL teacher and enjoys his enhanced social status as he begins hanging out with relatively wealthy whites from Canada and America. He misinterprets their fling as a serious relationship – he plans on proposing to her – but Alice suddenly leaves to reunite with an ex-lover she met while teaching in Vietnam. The story is narrated from Jaime’s perspective and is, perhaps, the most tragic in the collection as his broken heart is a symbol for how globalization produces imbalances between advanced-capitalist nations and their trade partners: the travelling ESL teachers seek temporary, exploitative relationships with locals and leave whenever they see fit; meanwhile, Jaime’s relatives die while sneaking across the border into the United States, and he realizes that it will take many, many years of work to afford a plane ticket so that he may pursue his lost love.

Hollie Adams’s *Things You’ve Inherited from Your Mother* is a self-help guide written by a self-obsessed misanthrope – Carrie – who struggles to manage a series of personal crises: her mother’s death, a loveless partnership, unemployment, and her teenage daughter’s emerging sexuality. The entries literalize the genre: they are intended to facilitate the author’s, rather than the reader’s, self-development – an ironic take on the genre that delights in the anti-hero’s self-destructive narcissism. The structural conceit allows Carrie to reflect on how her mother’s failures negatively impacted her own life while remaining ironically unaware of how her selfishness is damaging her relationship with her daughter. Much of the humour originates from Carrie’s hypocrisy – the lengths she goes to hide her failures and avoid meaningful self-reflection. It is a self-help guide for a helpless thirty-something with psychopathic tendencies.

Things You've Inherited from Your Mother includes some interesting formal experiments. To-do lists, surveys, choose-you-own-adventure scenarios, and snarky tabulations are well integrated. While some authors have experimented with similar strategies, such as Zsuzsi Gartner and Rebecca Rosenblum, who have written satirical self-help stories in the second person, Adams uses the narrative perspective to establish Carrie's wit and present her easily solvable problems as epic tragedies. They produce an unusual form of irony in which the reader is forced, or at least structurally encouraged, to sympathize with a misanthrope; by telling her own story in the second person, Carrie forces the reader to simultaneously entertain her whining while also living her perceived misfortunes. The help she craves is the underserved pity of readers, who might, in some way, forgive her poor decisions and reluctance to change. It is questionable whether the narrator's advice will provide any benefit to anyone beyond facilitating Carrie's epiphany that change is needed even if she is uncommitted to reformation. Indeed, the novel concludes with a note to the reader: "Congratulations on helping yourself become happy/rich/thin/in a relationship/a non-smoker/able to stay awake for a reasonable amount of time! You only have yourself to thank. Unless you were unsuccessful in changing your life. Then you only have yourself to blame. Please remember that I wrote the world's first true self-help book, so any negative feedback should be sent directly to yourself."

Sean Trinder's *The Guy Who Pumps Your Gas Hates You* is a coming-of-age story about a slacker who matures through a creative-writing course at a local college. The protagonist's life has stalled after he graduated from high school: beyond pumping gas, smoking, and partying with old but degenerate friends, he does little. He has few genuine friends. His relationship with his single father is fraught. He's also a world-class asshole whose only joy in life is pointing out the idiocy of customers and the failings of others. His wit is his only redeeming quality; it

distinguishes him from his pedestrian acquaintances. Set in the millennial years, the novel is a feel-good comedy, the literary equivalent of Kevin Smith's 1994 indie hit *Clerks*.

The Guy Who Pumps Your Gas Hates You finds humour in service-industry jobs that, as the narrator admits, could be filled by anyone: the comedy originates from the narrator's hyperbolic responses to mundane problems and inept customers. At first, there is a lot of unnecessary swearing and rudeness, which highlight the protagonist's immaturity. But the protagonist's anger and use of profanity slowly subside after he enrolls in a creative-writing course and dates an older twenty-something who encourages him to pursue culture and education. As he embraces his talents, he's more willing to empathize with others; this helps him reconcile with his father, solidify his budding romance, and cut back on the profanity.

Works Received

Adams, Hollie. *Things You've Inherited from Your Mother*. NeWest. 170. \$19.95

Ah-Sen, Jean Marc. *Grand Menteur*. BookThug. 200. \$20.00

Allfrey, Ellah Wakatama, ed. *Let's Tell This Story Properly: An Anthology of the Commonwealth Short Story Prize*. Dundurn. 240. \$26.99

Andrew, Suzanne Alyssa. *Circle of Stones*. Dundurn. 272. \$17.99

Battershill, Andrew. *Pillow*. Coach House. 240. \$19.95

Besel, Donna. *Lessons from a Nude Man*. Hagios. 128. \$18.95

Brooks, Carellin. *One Hundred Days of Rain*. BookThug. 208. \$20.00

Canniff, Christopher. *Poor Man's Galapagos*. Blue Denim. viii, 250. \$24.00

Christie, Michael. *If I Fall, If I Die*. Random House. viii, 328. \$15.00

Conley, Tim. *Dance Moves of the Near Future*. New Star. vi, 154. \$18.00

Daniels, Carol. *Bearskin Diary*. Nightwood/Harbour. 256. \$21.95

Difalco, Salvatore. *Mean Season*. Mansfield. 250. \$20.00

Douglas, Rhonda. *Welcome to the Circus*. Freehand. viii, 184. \$21.95

Eyamie, Jeff. *No Escape from Greatness*. Turnstone. viii, 312. \$19.00

Fawcett, Katherine. *The Little Washer of Sorrows*. Thistledown. 224. \$18.95

Fiorito, Joe. *Rust Is a Form of Fire*. Guernica. xii, 118. \$20.00

Furlong, Dayle. *Saltwater Cowboys*. Dundurn. 272. \$19.99

Gault, Connie. *A Beauty*. McClelland & Stewart. 328. \$29.95

Gauvin, Mitchell. *Vandal Confession*. Now or Never. viii, 154. \$19.95

Giles, W. Mark. *Seep*. Anvil. 224. \$20.00

Goodman, John C. *The Duck Lake Chronicles*. Quattro. 98. \$18.00

Goodwin, Daniel. *Sons and Fathers*. Linda Leith. 240. \$18.95

Grainger, James. *Harmless*. McClelland & Stewart/Penguin Random House. vi, 280.
\$22.00

Gray, R.W. *Entropic*. NeWest. viii, 240. \$18.95

Guenther, Lisa. *Friendly Fire*. NeWest. vi, 168. \$19.95

Hardcastle, Kevin. *Debris*. Biblioasis. vi, 232. \$19.95

Hiyate, Wasela. *Travel Is So Broadening*. Quattro. 132. \$18.00

Hobsbawn-Smith, dee. *What Can't Be Undone*. Thistledown. 200. \$18.95

Horne, Christine Rehder. *Tarstopping*. NeWest. 340. \$19.95

Hutton, June. *Two Gun & Sun*. Caitlin. 240. \$22.95

Johnston, Sharon. *Matrons and Madams*. Dundurn. 238. \$24.99

Joseph, Shane. *In the Shadow of the Conquistador*. Blue Denim. vi, 240. \$24.00

Kushwaha, Anita. *The Escape Artist*. Quattro. 78. \$18.00

Lemay, Shawna. *Rumi and the Red Handbag*. Palimpsest. 144. \$19.95

Mason, Paul. *The Night Drummer*. Now or Never. vi, 230. \$19.95

Massey, Josh. *The Plotline Bomber of Innisfree*. BookThug. 184. \$20.00

McDougall, Bruce. *Every Minute Is a Suicide*. Porcupine's Quill. 192. \$22.95

McGregor, Raymond. *The Blue Knight*. Bookland. 160. \$19.95

McLean, Elizabeth. *The Swallows Uncaged*. Freehand. x, 310. \$21.95

Myers, Janet Turpin. *The Last Year of Confusion*. Seraphim. 208. \$19.95

Myrl, Coulter. *A Year of Days*. University of Alberta Press. x, 198. \$24.95

Philips, Elizabeth. *The Afterlife of Birds*. Freehand. 320 \$21.95

Platana, Janette. *A Token of My Affliction*. Tightrope. 217. \$20.95

Quist, Jennifer. *Sistering*. Linda Leith. vi, 302. \$19.95

Randolph, Jeanne. *Shopping Cart Pantheism*. ARP. 136. \$14.95

Robillard, Leo Brent. *Road to Atlantis*. Turnstone. x, 194. \$19.00

Rodriguez, J.P. *Escape!!!* Quattro. 152. \$18.00

Rosenblatt, Joe. *Snake City*. Exile. 178. \$19.95

Safer, Catherine Hogan. *Wild Pieces*. Killick. x, 138. \$19.95

Sampson, Mark. *The Secrets Men Keep*. Now or Never. vi, 178. \$19.95

Samuel, Sigal. *The Mystics of Mile End*. Freehand. viii, 296. \$21.95

Schofield, Anakana. *Martin John*. Biblioasis. 328. \$19.95

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Steeves, Mike. *Giving Up*. BookThug. 208. \$20.00

Stewart, Wendi. *Meadowlark*. NeWest. 304. \$21.95

Stibbards, Shawn Curtis. *The Video Watcher*. Biblioasis. 192. \$19.95

Taylor, Jess. *Pauls*. BookThug. 192. \$20.00

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Von Konigslow, Alexis. *The Capacity for Infinite Happiness*. Wolsak and Wynn. 320.
\$22.00

Vu, Caroline. *That Summer in Provincetown*. Guernica. x, 134. \$20.00

Wallace, Jessica. *Meet You There*. Now or Never. viii, 222. \$19.95

Wasilewski, Corinne. *Live from the Underground*. Mansfield. 232. \$20.00

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