Number

THE BIBLIOPHILE

One

Biblioasis Subscription Packages

Though we always urge readers to support their local booksellers, if they don't have one or cannot regularly find our books in their shops we also are now offering a range of Biblioasis subscription packages and bundles to ensure that you don't miss out on anything. Subscribers not only often receive their titles before publication; they also get a range of free ephemera and keepsakes throughout the year, including limited edition chapbooks, broadsides, pins, cards and other collectibles, as well as exclusive offers throughout the year. 2021's subscription packages include:

Biblioasis Limited Editions Club: $150 for four exclusive signed hardcover editions

Best Canadian Bundle: All three 2021 anthologies for $60

Biblioasis Translation Club: Read the world with four titles from writers from Mozambique, Iceland, Norway, and Germany for $80

Biblioasis Poetry Club: Five poetry titles, including 2021's *Best Canadian* anthology, for $100

Biblioasis Nonfiction Club: Five nonfiction titles from 2021's list for $100

Biblioasis Fiction Club: Five fiction titles from 2021's list for $100

Biblioasis Mystery Box: Let us pick five 2021 titles for you for $100

**** Special Promotion: All subscription packages purchased between December 2020 and March 2021 will receive a free one year subscription to *CNQ: Canadian Notes & Queries* ****

Published with the generous assistance of Ontario Creates

ONTARIO CREATES | ONTARIO CRÉATIF

THE • *1* • BIBLIOPHILE

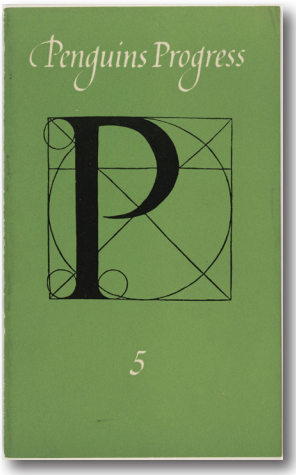
NEWS FROM THE BIBLIOMANSE

SOME FEATURES IN THIS ISSUE

Recovering the Rhythm

Although conditions in the publishing industry are still far from normal they have sufficiently improved to enable us to make reliable forecasts about forthcoming publications … The relative improvement in publishing conditions enables us, moreover, to plan out books on a firmer basis of selection …

You might think these words refer to the present Covid moment, but they preface the 1947 relaunch of *Penguin's Progress*, the direct-to-reader newsletter produced monthly by that publisher and mailed to more than 50,000 subscribers. Like so much other publishing ephemera, these are exceedingly scarce: I own a short run of a dozen or so issues, all post '47; the six pre-war issues do not seem to exist at all. We've been thinking of starting our own version for at least half a dozen years, though have not until this moment managed it: our enthusiasms are many, and time and energy increasingly short. But it felt necessary, even urgent, to start one before 2020 came to an unforgettable and ignominious close. This first issue of The Bibliophile was put together over a couple of weekends: whatever errors or omissions are in its pages are a result of this rush. Future issues will present a wider array of offerings.



Cover of *Penguin's Progress* issue 5.

So, wherefore this urgency? 2020 has offered all of us many challenges and lessons. The ones, at least professionally speaking, that keep me up at night are all tied to discoverability. My staff tires of my constant reminders that the root word of publishing is *public*: this is not *Field of Dreams*. It's not just a question of publishing excellent books; if we don't reach readers through whatever means are at our disposal we've failed our writers. But doing so has never been more difficult, and there've been times in 2020 when it has seemed impossible. The places on which we relied for timely and considered coverage, especially in Canada, have greatly diminished space and resources; cuts to the CBC and changes in programming have resulted in fewer opportunities there; television is even less of an option than it once was; and even awards—we've been very lucky

in 2020 with two books winning national awards and two more shortlisted for others, including a Giller—have less impact in terms of sales and media than they once had. Our national book retailer is buying fewer titles and fewer copies of those titles they do stock, making it even more difficult to capitalize on the media we get; and Amazon has deprioritized books, often giving the buy button to third party sellers, resulting in less money for authors and publishers and more expensive prices and longer wait times for customers. As I will never tire of pointing out, Amazon is no longer either the cheapest or fastest option for getting anything but best-sellers and toilet paper: the one constant is that they continue to do irreparable damage to the world of books, along with pretty much everything else.

Alexis Wells delivering a local book order with an improvised pulley system.

The three bright spots in all of this have been our writers, independent booksellers, and readers. The former continue to write important, urgent, and beautiful books, and, despite the fact that the literary world has been turned upside-down, have shown a willingness to do whatever it takes to help us promote their work, as well as faith and patience as we sort things out. Meanwhile, booksellers have shown a resilience and creative vitality that have allowed them to adapt and change where their larger corporate counterparts have not; their connections to the communities they've long and unselfishly served have been strengthened. And as both booksellers and publishers we've seen readers show a hunger for new books and voices over the past year as they try to make sense of the world they now find themselves in. We've watched as they've spread the word about what they've loved to others, resulting in books which have sold well despite the paucity of coverage.

According to apocrypha, Albert Einstein opined that the definition of insanity was to do the same exact thing over and over

again while expecting a different result. We cannot on our own change the direction of our national newspapers and critical spaces; nor can we alter the priorities of industrial retailers who use the cultural currency provided by books as a smokescreen for their other, more lucrative business lines. But what we can do is better serve those of you who care about books and good writing, and it's our hope that The Bibliophile will help, whether you're one of our writers, a bookseller, critic, editor or reader, keep you better informed about what is happening at Biblioasis.

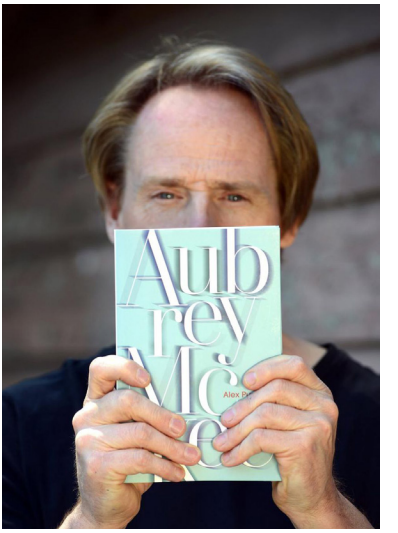
When I first thought of becoming a publisher 17 or so years ago now, it was John Metcalf's *An Aesthetic Underground* which pushed me over the precipice. It was the first thing I'd read that made me feel that I could do this thing, that my work as a bookseller, festival organizer, and reader was apprenticeship enough. But what really energized me at the time was the idea of community central to its vision, a gathering of writers and readers and booksellers, all of whom cared about words and books and ideas and the shape they make in a life. That's what we've tried to build here at Biblioasis; and that's what we hope The Bibliophile will engender as well. We hope that you'll consider it an invitation to join the wider Biblioasis community, to learn a bit more not just about our authors and their books but about the press itself. Each issue, published with charming irregularity (i.e. 3-4 times a year), will be filled with author interviews and essays and profiles, as well as short reviews from booksellers and other readers; there will be press news, excerpts from current and forthcoming work, and snapshots of Biblioasis press and bookshop life, as well as special offers. I envision you reading The Bibliophile with your coffee in the morning, before the day gets going; or perhaps better yet with a glass of sherry or scotch in the evening. I sincerely wish I could be there with you. In any case, put your feet up and read on, and do let me know if you have any ideas for what you would like us to include in future issues.

Dan Wells

Publisher
Windsor, Ontario
22 November 2020

Nick Mount on Alex Pugsley's *Aubrey McKee*

Aubrey McKee is a story about growing up mixed up and mixed in with the story of a city. I loved the characters, large and small, the good, the bad, and the weird, which is pretty much all of them: the precociously strange Cyrus Mair, the magnetic Karin Friday, the supporting cast of bullies, dealers, alcoholics, eccentrics, friends and lovers, distant parents and demented grandparents, and most of all their bemused chronicler, the unquenchable Aubrey McKee. I loved the novel's quixotically genteel style, Aubrey's voice, his infectious delight in words and wit and everything and everyone around him. As a story, as writing, as cultural history, it's easily the best book about Halifax I have ever read or ever will read. My favourite book of the year, highly recommended for anyone who ever knew Halifax or was ever young and confused.



The author and his debut work.

An Interview with Mark Kingwell, author of *On Risk*

For those who are coming to your work for the first time, can you tell us a little about yourself and your writing?

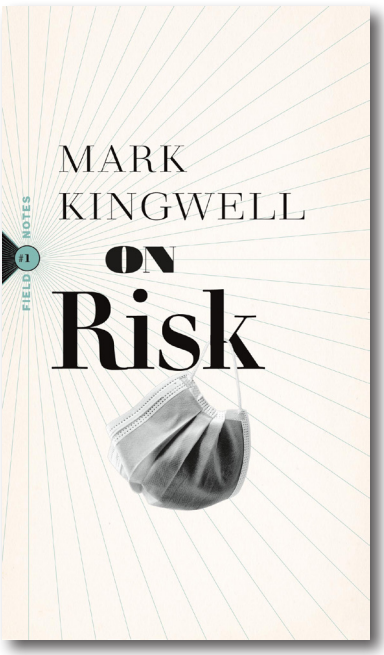
I'm a philosophy professor, so all my work is philosophical in some sense. But the non-academic books I've written cover a fairly wide range of topics and are aimed at an audience more diverse than my fellow academics. Philosophy is too important to be confined to scholarly journals and academic presses.

So I've written about cities, music, happiness, baseball, and even cocktails, with an eye to the literary and conceptual signifi-

cance that underlies all aspects of life. I guess I'd say that the common theme in all of my work, however diverse, is a concern with political and social structure. I was trained in political theory, especially the sub-field known as justice theory, which analyzes the basic structure of societies. Pretty much everything I've written is about that kind of analysis.

Maybe not the cocktails book so much, ha, but I could probably construct an argument if you wanted me to. (Cocktails sustain fellowship. They reflect tradition. They fold into most cultures' styles of everyday life. And so on.) But happiness, baseball, architecture, and even music are easier subjects for extending academic philosophy into daily life.

What are your thoughts on the political pamphlet as a form? Had you ever thought about writing a pamphlet before?



I love the idea of book series, and especially series of short books on diverse topics. That's why Field Notes is such a great idea. But pamphlets also have a long tradition, lately neglected or replaced by other, often online forms, of polemical and topical writing. They should feel urgent and timely, but also have enough rigour to sustain a valid set of arguments. Some of the greatest writing we know came in this form, from Thomas Paine to John Milton and John Calvin. In a way, pamphlets were the original social media: brief, pointed, of the moment, intended to both provoke and convince. Despite what some people believe these days, accomplishing all that takes more than 280 characters.

Where did the idea for a book on risk come from? How did your conception of the project change when Covid-19 came along?

As I say in the Introduction, I had been thinking about the political dimensions of risk for a while, in part because of that justice theory training. Risks are often considered natural and hence mute or indifferent. And this is true in some basic sense: a hurricane

or a pandemic does not, itself, discriminate between victims. But we all know that risks are shouldered in drastically disproportionate ways. Identifiable populations suffer more than others, and not for idle or unchangeable reasons. Risk is always political, driven by everything from where and when you live to how much status or wealth you enjoyed (or didn't) before a given calamity took its toll. When these factors are clustered around race, for example, which they certainly are, risk becomes a clear issue of social justice, not just of random misfortune.

So that is one core concern of this book. The C19 pandemic altered the terrain but, more importantly, it revealed the actual contours of it. Risk is a fact of daily life. Mostly we ignore it, or make peace with it, or plan some kind of protection from it. But these opportunities are not evenly distributed. A pandemic is a brute-force social bad; but it affects people in very different ways. That's why those "We're all in this together" signs are so annoying. Sure, yes, in one trivial sense that is true: we are all susceptible to a disease that does not care about who or what we are. But in reality, that disease has drastically different effects on different groups. "We're all in this together" is a bit like saying "All lives matter" in response to someone protesting that "Black lives matter." It just misses the political point at issue.

Going outside: pros & cons?

Go outside by all means. Just wear a mask. Simple.

You are a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Toronto. What is it like to teach philosophy today versus 20 years ago?

Well, right now of course we are busy schooling ourselves on how to conduct classes either entirely or partly online. This is challenging but also kind of fun. The available interfaces aren't very good, and I will always be of the view that in-person teaching is the only truly great kind. But circumstances alter cases, and sometimes you have to change horses in mid-stream. That keeps us honest, I think, about what universities can do, and what they're for. I'm sad for the students, of course, because their campus experience will be much diminished.

There are justice issues here too, by the way. The unexamined assumption of online education is that everybody has reliable access to a computer, relevant software, and a steady ISP. These things should not be taken for granted, any more than buying books or having enough money for tuition. Students these days often have to work to make it through university. This puts pressure on them, such that their tolerance for large reading lists, for example, is strained. We also are more mindful now of differences in learning

style. Not everybody who is in the class is an old-fashioned book worm like I was when I started my undergraduate degree in 1980.

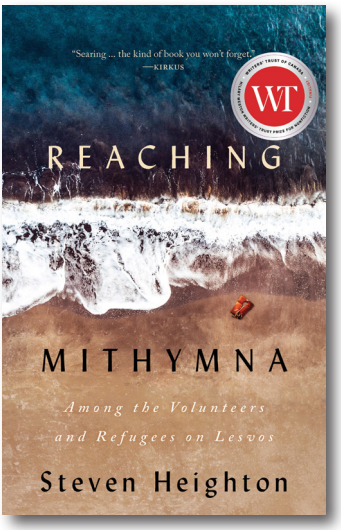
Wow, that was forty years ago. I think I'll stop this answer now, and maybe think about a cocktail instead. (It's 5:30 as I type this, in case anyone reading this is wondering.)

What are you reading right now?

Lots of different things. I'm finishing a book on the ethics of architecture, so that has sent me back to Jane Jacobs, Le Corbusier, and Heidegger, among others. I'm also just starting a new book project on the ethics and politics of artificial intelligence. A good deal of the relevant reading there is technical, but I was fascinated by Ian McEwan's novel *Machines Like Me*.

Otherwise, fiction at bedtime. I re-read Timothy Findley's *Headhunter*, and it was of course very apt for our moment. Right now I'm reading Brian Moore's sort-of spy thriller *The Statement*. I read a lot of espionage and adventure novels, everything from C. S. Forester and Patrick O'Brian to Gavin Lyall and Duncan Kyle. Then, for a change of pace, I just picked up an old Elizabeth Bowen novel called *Eva Trout*. And I'm happy to report that there's also a Biblioasis title on my bedside table, a novel by old pal Alex Pugsley, *Aubrey McKee*.

John Metcalf on Steven Heighton's *Reaching Mithymna*



Over breakfast coffee, my wife, Myrna, looked up from the newspaper and said, "It's the *St. Louis* all over again."

"What is?"

"The boat people."

It transpired she was talking about the *St. Louis* with its nine hundred Jewish refugees aboard who were turned away in 1939 from Cuba, the USA, and Canada, and returned to Europe where many were slaughtered in the Nazi death camps.

Driven by this remembered shame, Myrna and I took in a Vietnamese teen-aged brother and sister abandoned in the Malaysian refugee camp on Pulau Bidong; they lived with us for the next two and a half years.

Steven Heighton writes in *Reaching Mithymna*:

"I'm still not sure why I'm here, beyond a wish to do something useful, involving flesh and blood people instead of invented characters and words on a screen."

The author, fellow volunteers, and refugees conversing around a fire. Photo by Neal McQueen.

His account of volunteering on Lesbos opens with his walking along the tide line: " . . . more life jackets, water bottles, disposable diapers, a saturated hoodie, an infant soother . . . a tiny shoe with pink laces tied . . . "

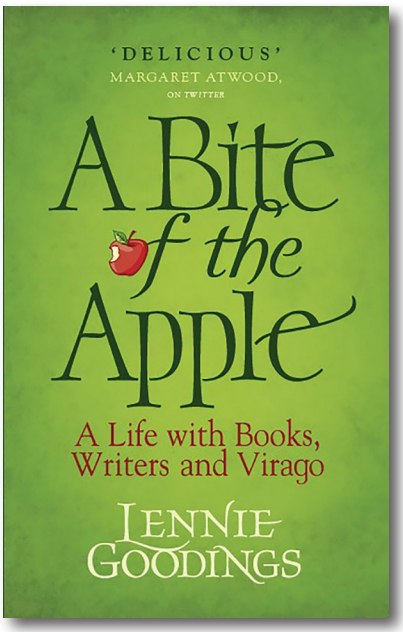
And with this we are in the refugee world of helpless migrants and tough volunteers battling their own exhaustion as they wrap the nightly arrivals in silver thermal blankets.

Tough, overwhelmed, tender, this is Heighton bearing witness, Heighton writing at the height of his powers.

On publishing and publishing memoirs

There is this occasional thing we do at Biblioasis— I'm not really sure what to call it—that was started a couple of years ago

by someone who probably binge-watched too many episodes of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* over a long weekend. Whenever someone says something that has some bearing on what we do as publishers, usually something born of frustration or anxiety or desperation or, less occasionally, insight, someone else at the office will invariably opine "That's the title of your publishing memoir." Vanessa Stauffer, the press's managing editor, will then take out the notebook into which she logs these entries for some undisclosed future use. Occasionally, during Whiskey Friday, the communal drink we have to unwind at the end of a week, she'll pull out her book and remind us of a few. A couple recent titles include: *The Emails Keep Coming Back Worse, Most of it Not Fit for Public Consumption,* and *It'll Be Fine … I Think.*



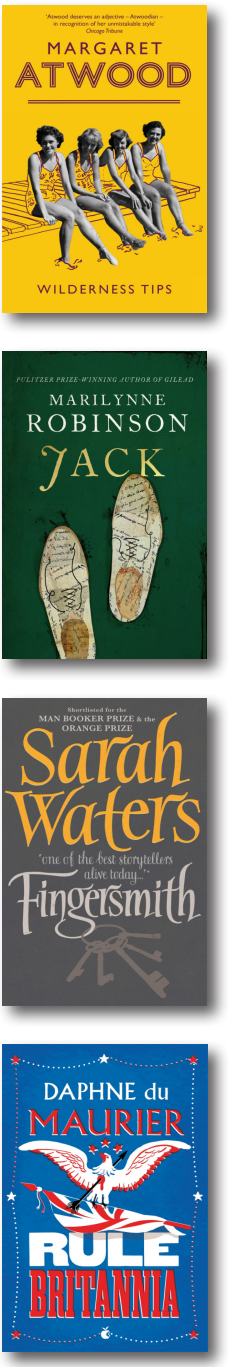
The title of my own publishing memoir, as voted on by a rotating jury of employees, and jotted down by Vanessa as I tried to explain the low-wire act that is independent literary publishing in Canada to a new Biblioasis recruit, is: *Idealism, and How to Pay for It*. Managing the latter without losing the former has been one of the toughest balancing acts of my professional life, as I know it's been for so many other literary publishers, perhaps this year more than ever.

When the partial manuscript for what later became *A Bite of the Apple* landed in my inbox a little over 20 months ago, I was at a low point. One of my working definitions of publishing for many years has been the management of disappointment, and I was getting tired of it. It would just be a little booklet, Anne McDermid explained to me. Titled *The Idealistic Publisher,* Lennie's book would be primarily concerned with how to publish honourably while maintaining one's ideals and still survive in a commercial environment. It was exactly what I needed at that moment, and even though the book was far from complete, the sample I read reminded me of Andre Schiffrin and Diana Athill and a few others: it reminded me of why it is I do what I do, and why

it is I am lucky to do so. Outside of making mistakes and trying to learn from them, reading publishing memoirs has been a key aspect of my professional education: I have learned more from Lennie Goodings's *A Bite of the Apple* than I have many. Lucky for us the book expanded in ambition and scope, becoming a full memoir and manifesto of forty-plus years of activist publishing, and we're all richer for it.

I of course knew of Lennie Goodings and Virago, having first come across their iconic green classic series in university and in the first iteration of Biblioasis Bookshop. But somehow it had escaped me that Lennie was Canadian. Born in St. Catherines in a liberal and book-filled house, she went to Queen's University where she studied English and Film studies. After a brief sojourn working at a bookstore on the west coast, she decided to head to England to try and get a job in publishing, landing on the doorstep at Virago in 1978. Over the next 42 years Lennie did every single job in publishing but rights and sales, working in publicity and marketing, production, editorial, and management, both as the publisher and chair of Virago. Over her career at Virago the house has published thousands of titles; Lennie has edited hundreds of these, working with writers as varied as Margaret Atwood, Marilynne Robinson, and Sarah Waters; and among the many accolades she's been awarded, I expect the Booksellers Industry Award: Editor and Imprint of the Year, in 2010, coming as it did from her peers, meant the most.

Over her time at Virago the press has had seven different owners and went from a fiercely independent house to a corporate one; then back to an independent before being purchased in the mid '90s by one of the larger conglomerates, Hachette, where it has remained firmly since. Somehow through it all Virago has managed to maintain a dis-



Virago covers through the years.

tinct identity, remain true to its mission, vision, and the idealism of its founders while navigating a range of challenges. Lennie has played a key role in guiding the organization through many of these transitions. As such, perhaps more than most publishers, she has straddled the divide that separates the independents from their larger corporate cousins and can and does speak to what each can learn from each. And she understands that there's more that binds us one to the other than separates us, something many of us in the trenches occasionally forget.

There are many things I admire about Lennie—her intelligence, grace, passion, knowledge, kindness, open-mindedness, generosity, her ability to tell a good story—but perhaps what I am most in awe of is her stamina. I have occasionally joked that 15 years as a publisher sometimes feels like a life sentence with time off for good behaviour. The adrenaline on which I relied to carry me through early on is getting me less far every year; I worry about how to maintain care in a world that can seem largely indifferent to what we love most. But Lennie, in her fifth decade in publishing, seems as passionate about it as ever, more urgently aware of both its failings and its potential, its power and its responsibilities, its ability to change the world for the better. I don't think that there's a more important discussion to be had in 2020, which makes her *A Bite of the Apple* essential reading for anyone in publishing, and indeed, anyone with an interest in social change and literary culture at all.

Lennie and beloved Toronto bookseller, Ben McNally.

Adapted from an introduction given by Dan Wells as part of the International Visitor's Program, TIFA, October 28, 2020.

*

From Vanessa's Notebooks: Other Notable Biblioasis Press Publishing Memoir Titles

It's the Middle You Have to Watch Out For

How Things Should Be

Erring on the Side of Possibility

I May Have Agreed to Certain Things

It Was More of a Rictus

Bookseller Trading Cards

Proust may have had his madeleine: nothing brings me back to my Chatham, Ontario, childhood more quickly than the powdered pink scent of O-Pee-Chee bubble gum, a thin, sharp-cornered stick of which came with every wax pack of baseball cards. I used to pore over these cards as a boy, organizing them by team and series, memorizing the stats and facts on their backs; whether it was Bill Atkinson or Fergie Jenkins (Chatham boys both), Eddie Murray or Rick Monday, these were the heroes I most wanted to be like when I grew up. There was nothing I wanted more as a young boy than to one day be on a card of my own.

When we were trying to come up with a way of paying tribute to our independent bookseller friends at Winter Institute (the American Bookseller Association's annual conference, which we attend to promote our books and authors every year), riffing back and forth with various ideas, we eventually hit on bookseller trading cards. We produced a quick

run, aging our bubble gum so that it would be appropriately stale, and sealing up 500 packages of them for the fair.

To say they were a hit would be an understatement. They went viral, getting wide coverage, including in the Washington Post, with booksellers and readers both wanting to collect them. We designed close to 20, to launch before Independent Booksellers' Day, before the pandemic derailed our plans. But we're back on track for 2021, and expect to roll out a dozen new ones over the next year.

How to Write a Sci-Fi Rock 'N Roll Novel in Rhyming Couplets

Jason Guriel

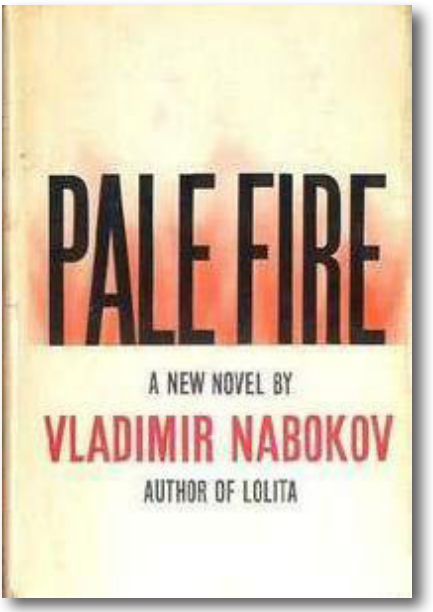
I hadn't written poetry in four years, when all of a sudden I found myself writing a lot of it, hundreds of lines of the stuff. This was surprising. For one, I thought I'd given up poetry (even if, as Dorothy Parker once put it, "nobody seemed to notice my magnificent gesture"). Also, when I used to write a poem, it was always short. Spilling onto the second page of the Word doc was decadence. It was as close as I got to Epic Poetry.

Perhaps I still thought of myself mainly as a critic. Editors sometimes took my pitches, and Twitter sometimes took note. Prose gets more love than poetry. Or hate. But hate's a reaction, at least; someone was reading those essays and reviews. The poems—

playing the long game, playing for longevity—had been pitched to the immortal dead.

Plus, it had gotten easy, banging out the 1,200-word "take," a word more spat than said. Writers should be wary when writing starts to feel easy. "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader," said Robert Frost. It's a worn saying, but a solid one, too, like some ancient monument many hands have passed over.

By the spring of 2017, it had begun to occur to me that it might be time to try something harder, something more ambitious than short lyric poems (which I wasn't writing anyway) or ephemeral prose.



Pale Fire provided a model: a long poem, in heroic couplets, that delivered a compelling story. Nabokov's 999-line masterpiece had plenty of poetry: a pair of scissors is a "dazzling synthesis of sun and star," a winter is "scrape-scooped away"—but it was also unfashionably linear, conspicuously coherent, and clear as a tumbler.

The long poems presented to me in university—*The Waste Land*, *The Cantos*, *The Maximus Poems*—were defiantly unreadable: fragmentary, allusive, evasive. They had their moments; indeed, the dispensation of moments, pottery shards of perception, was often the point. But the shards rarely fit together, and the poems seemed to exist to be explicated, not enjoyed.

The splendidly functional couplets of *Pale Fire*, on the other hand, calmly, firmly carried me along:

> I love you when you're standing on the lawn
> Peering at something in a tree: "It's gone
> It was so small. It might come back" (all this
> Voiced in a whisper softer than a kiss).
> I love you when you call me to admire
> A jet's pink trail above the sunset fire.
> I love you when you're humming as you pack

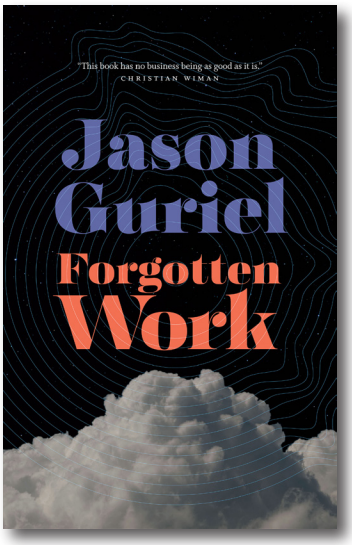
A suitcase or the farcical car sack
With round-trip zipper. And I love you most
When with a pensive nod you greet her ghost
And hold her first toy on your palm, or look
At a postcard from her, found in a book.

Nabokov has pulled off a lot in these 12 lines. He's completed his couplets, which furnish their music but aren't so noisy they can't fade into the background. He's also contrived some first-rate poetic images—"round-trip zipper," "sunset fire"—while engineering a believable, likeable character, a feat any novelist ought to envy. And he's consolidated the reader's interest in the character by hinting at some domestic tragedy.

But the poem remains (to flog another Frostism) a future largely not taken. Few poets have followed the example of *Pale Fire*, with its effortless couplets and engaging narrative—perhaps because it's not quite a real or official poem. Nabokov's couplets, after all, are a means to an end: a means to endnotes, authored by a fictional scholar. And it's the endnotes that make up the bulk of *Pale Fire*'s page count; the ballooning endnotes, the true point of the book, conceal a novel.

Put another way, the poem isn't a pure product of the poetry world. It's a work of art, to be sure, and better than much of what the poetry world produces. But *Pale Fire* is also an outlier, just quirky enough for its example to be safely ignored.

*



But I couldn't ignore it. And by the fall of 2017, I'd composed the first chunk of what would become *Forgotten Work*. Nabokov's poem was about a poet. Mine, too, was about a maker of music—an indie band. When the story opens, the band is rehearsing in a garage and brainstorming a name for itself. Thus I had the makings of my very own bildungsroman. The chunk was even (check!) in heroic couplets.

But recklessly, on a whim, I decided to start the next section 30 years in the future. My

verse novel wouldn't be about the band, after all; it would be about the band's cult following. What's more, I decided each chapter would reboot the story and focus on a new character, perhaps even further into the future. In other words, with each new chapter, I'd have to establish a new setting, a new set of motivations, a new conflict, a new technological context—all the while ensuring that (a) each line was bopping along in iambic pentameter, and (b) the word at the end of each line had its mate.

The limited edition hardcover.

It seemed important to make things hard for myself. Not hard in, say, the Oulipian sense; I've never been drawn to the elaborate restraints that some poets make a fetish of (e.g. "Write a poem in which every other word starts with the letter 'Z'!"). But I had a sense that if I could clear the hurdles I'd arranged, the book would take care of itself.

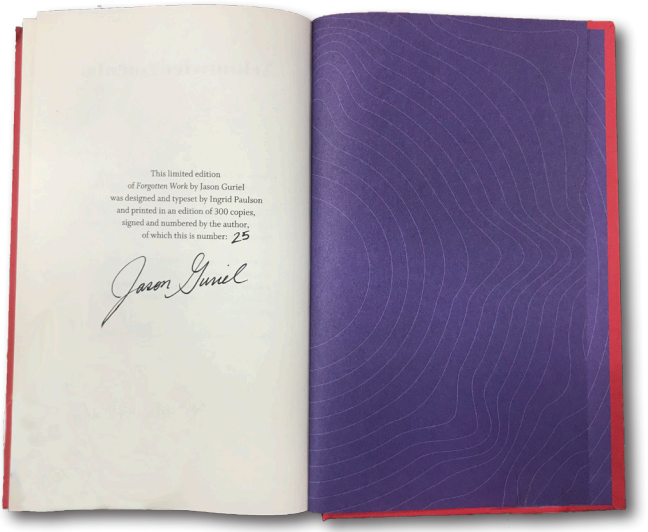
The rhyme scheme, it turns out, was a constant collaborator. Completing a rhyme tended to nudge me, and the book, in unanticipated directions. Often, the nudge was negligible, and the book, like an aircraft carrier, barely shifted. But much like a character in some sci-fi story—who goes back in time, displaces a pebble, and returns to the present to find everyone now sports plumage—a rhyming poet's seemingly minor, local choices can ripple out and wrinkle the rest of the work.

Early on, I describe the taste of Hubert, a snobby English student circa 2037:

> Hubert loved looking back. He'd waved off eye
> Replacements; Hubert had a glasses guy
> Who sourced assorted old-school gear for old
> Souls and their skulls. His frames were bold,
> As quaint as whalebone corsets, hunting foxes,
> iPhones, and those primitive Xboxes
> That weren't implanted but, instead, sat on
> Your furniture. He loved the off-brand dawn
> His window ran, recorded when the sun
> Could still be seen. He loved such stuff as Fun

House, Horses, Astral Weeks, The La's, Pet Sounds,
Thomas Disch's essays, Ezra Pound's
Translations…

Which came first, the "foxes" or the "Xboxes?" I don't remember. But I do remember having no clear sense of what it meant that the sun could no longer be seen; I just liked the sound of that "off-brand dawn," and anyway, I needed at least the "dawn" because the Xboxes of the future no longer sit "on" furniture. (You can start to see how the rhyme scheme wasn't just a collaborator; at times, it was a dictator.)



Signed limited edition.

Now, the impact of the "foxes/Xboxes" rhyme was microscopic and more or less contained to the passage above. But it turns out that that missing sun, a throwaway prop, would throw its shadow over the rest of the book. After all, and as I discovered a chapter later, humans of the future have been careless. They've teleported so much trash into the exosphere, the trash has cohered into a cloud and come to obscure the sun.

*

For several years, writing my verse novel, there was always something to wake up to: a plotline to advance, a character to add flesh to, another couplet to complete. Like an AI come into consciousness, *Forgotten Work* came to write itself. What a relief this was. I noted, above, that I'd wanted to try something harder, some-

thing more ambitious than the short lyric poem. But I'd be terrified to attempt a short lyric poem now. Where would I even start?

The verse novel liberates poets from waiting around for lightning bolts—there's too much work to do! It also opens us up to poetic opportunities we might not otherwise realize we have. At one point in *Forgotten Work*, I explain a robot dog:

> White but flecked
> With grainy dots, the Shiba was a plastic
> Model that could stretch and turn elastic,
> Or press through a fence, its body bulging
> Forth as Play-Doh worms, the fence divulging
> Dog.

I love short lyric poems; I fall before Daniel Brown, Kay Ryan, Robyn Sarah, and Samuel Menashe. But I don't know how I'd ever have gotten to an image like that "body bulging / Forth as Play-Doh worms, the fence divulging / Dog," if I'd been writing the regular kind of poem, and not mulling over the makes of robot dog available in the 2050s.

*

"I BECAME A JOURNALIST partly so that I wouldn't ever have to rely on the press for my information," said the late Christopher Hitchens. I sometimes harbor a similar thought when it comes to poetry. The stuff I want to read simply isn't the stuff most poets are offering up (not enough robot dog, for one) so I have to mint it myself. This is why I write less and less about poetry these days—you're welcome!—and also why I can't stop reading works like *Pale Fire* or, say, *Don Juan*.

Written in the 19th century, Byron's proto-verse novel strikes me now as more modern than *The Waste Land* (than most poetry, really) even if it's less useful to the professor who has 50 minutes to fill and needs something sticky to explicate. It's faster, funnier, more energetic, more violent. More readable.

I get that I sound like a hopeless crank. Still, I can't help but think that the future of poetry, or one future for poetry, can be found in the past, in works like *Pale Fire*, *Don Juan*, and *The Golden Gate*, among others (though not many others!). As another hopeless crank, a character from *Forgotten Work*, reflects in iambs:

> The futures we prefer have long since passed.
> Tomorrow is interred inside the past.

Reintroducing the Metcalf-Rooke Award

The original Metcalf-Rooke Award was launched in 2005 for reasons both mercenary and honorary. After more than a year of publishing we were still finding it hard to attract quality manuscripts, and we hoped that an award, with its promise of more money, a publishing contract, and a national tour, might bring in better books. But we also wanted to acknowledge two writers who had done heroic work over the past decades editing, publishing, and championing the work of others. I remember both John Metcalf and Leon Rooke being hesitant at first about attaching their names to this neophyte venture, but their innate generosity overwhelmed their justifiable caution: and so the Metcalf-Rooke Award was born.

Like so much at Biblioasis, the establishment of the award was the result of ignorant enthusiasm: almost everything here begins with an impulse, a flash of excited insight; then comes the long work of trying to figure out how to actually do it. The Metcalf-Rooke Award proved to be a lot of work: we were overwhelmed with manuscripts, as many as a hundred that first year, with the number increasing every year; most of the manuscripts were as bad as the ones we received through regular channels, which led to an incredible amount of slogging; the new bookstore chain we partnered with—the name of which I forget now 15 years later—folded before the first award launched, leaving us with a much bigger financial commitment than we'd intended. But somehow it all came together in the end, and over the seven years we maintained the prize we discovered and published some exceptional writers, including Kathleen Winter, Rebecca Rosenblum, Amy Jones, Nancy Jo Cullen, Patricia Young, and A.J. Somerset; we also discovered and eventually published other writers, including Anakana Schofield and Alice Peterson, because of the award. From where we sit now, the track record of the award over those seven years was rather remarkable and achieved everything we hoped it would.

So why, then, did it end? The reasons are both murky and multitude. Anxiety: though it never did happen, I worried every year we'd be forced to publish something we couldn't stand behind, and as we grew and developed and attracted better books and authors to the press this seemed less and less worth the risk. Frustration: agents started signing on shortlisted writers as soon as we

announced the list, making acquisition more difficult, and in one of the later years affecting the decision-making of the judges since there was no certainty we would be able to acquire their first choice. Exhaustion: the award was a lot of work for everyone involved, and the larger the press grew the less time we had to devote to it. All of this resulted in our putting the award on hiatus for a year in 2013 to try and work out new processes, but as is the way of these things, once you pause something it's even harder to restart again: the Metcalf-Rooke Award came to an end.

Noted antiquarian bookseller Steven Temple had come on board in the second year to provide the prize money for the winning author: having for decades made his living largely from the selling of Canadian literature, he wanted to give back. After the first iteration of the Metcalf-Rooke Award came to an end, Temple kept the idea alive, urging us all to restart the prize. We appreciated his generosity, his desire to pay things forward; but it was only after Biblioasis took over the *Best Canadian Stories* anthology that an opportunity to do so presented itself: rather than restart an award for a new book, Metcalf asked, why not give the prize money to the best story published annually in the *Best Canadian* anthology? Steven agreed enthusiastically, and so the new Metcalf-Rooke Award has been born. And with the publication of the 2020 edition of *Best Canadian Stories* in October, we have our first Metcalf-Rooke winner in eight years: Kristyn Dunnion, for her story "Daughter of Cups."

The judges' statement, as one might expect from Metcalf and Rooke, was untypical:

> Hey Leon, hey Leon. Hey, have you had a chance to read through that *Best 2020* stuff yet?
> Mmm-hmm. How ya doin?
> Fine.
> That neck-thing?
> And your knee?
> So who …?
> Well, there's nothing to talk about, is there?
> Right, precisely. That is precisely what I thought.
> We're talking about the same story?
> That Ohio girl.
> She's the one. Live to ride, ride to live.

And though it may have been a little more difficult to pick a winner than this bit of dialogue suggests—after all, the 2020 anthology includes a story from recent Giller winner Souvankham Thammavongsa's *How To Pronounce Knife* alongside new stories by the likes of Omar El Akkad, Lynn Coady, Casey Plett, Eden Rob-

inson, and Naben Ruthnum, among others—there is no doubt in selecting Dunnion's story Rooke and Metcalf have chosen a work of exceptional merit, by a writer, both in this story and in her collection, *Stoop City*, who has found a voice and subject entirely her own. If the main question we must ask, after Mavis Gallant, is whether or not a work is alive, the answer in the case of Kristyn Dunnion is, resolutely, oh my goodness, yes!

An Interview with Kristyn Dunnion, author of *Stoop City*

The author reading *Stoop City* to Canadian geese as part of a COVID live reading series.

For those who are coming to your work for the first time, can you tell us a little about yourself and your writing?

I'm an old punk, meaning I'm drawn continually to themes of loyalty/betrayal, autonomy/authoritarianism, and the redemptive and healing powers in marginal communities. I love language as performance, as purveyor of powerful imagery and mystical subtext. Although my work tends toward the apocalyptic, *Stoop City* embraces comedy and magical realism.

You've written for both teens and adults. How does writing for adults differ from writing a Young Adult novel?

Foremost, it's a perspective or point-of-view shift when I write for O.A. (old adults). A more mature audience requires that narrative be delivered intellectually, concretely, sensually and not mainly in emotional terms. My recent work has more of a literary focus. And I've explored a few characters with concerns that, quite frankly, might seem boring to a teen reader. Condo upgrades? Miscarriages? Mortgage deferrals? *Stoop City* also features some unforgettable teen characters, who yearn to express autonomy and radioactive desire, while still being caught up in the wheels of adult machinations.

Tell us about writing the book. How did the pieces of the collection come together?

These stories have been simmering (seething) for years, and several were published in fine literary journals. My unifying concept for a collection changed over time; I like linked stories when narrative connections aren't forced, when, as a reader, you earn a shining moment of recognition—aha! Gay Pauly, a secondary character from "Now is the Time to Light Fires" stars in "Adoro Te Devote" as a queer teen in the 1980s, for example. Making that connection substantiates both pieces. These stories co-exist, but like people, are built to stand alone.

If you could pick one thing you'd like readers to take away from this book, what would it be?

Stoop City buzzes with class struggle, the search for love, and ultimately for belonging in community. So, there cannot be one voice, alone. Hope lies in plurality and diversity of experience, strengthening empathy and compassion for those who walk a divergent path.

Was there one story in the collection that was particularly difficult to write? If so, why?

The stories were difficult for different reasons. Although the "Daughter of Cups" storyline is pure fiction, it's set in a version of my hometown and that felt deeply personal, a risk for me. Killing off an ex-girlfriend and fictionizing the break-up in "Light Fires"

was highly therapeutic; never intended for publication, it's too hilarious not to share. "Tracker & Flow," inspired by a chaos-inciting feral cat I adopted, terrified me since several plot points came 'true' after penning them. "A Four-Letter-Word for 'Loose,'" counterpart to "Fits Ritual," never quite satisfied, and I experimented with its structure the most. Film courses offered a new way of looking at narrative, and finally gave the entry point I needed. "Adoro Te Devote" also suffered dozens of radical revisions over the years; flat-out rejections from many fine journals were unhelpful, until one frazzled editor commented on the gay sex scenes, indicating they read as coercion: *oops!* (Now revised to demonstrate mutual willingness and desire, albeit laced with guilt and confusion.) A few birthed easily, as though I was tranquilized and midwifed by a divine hand—"Pristine," and "Affliction," and "Last Call at the Dogwater Inn."

What are you reading right now?

bell hooks' *All About Love*—why didn't I read this twenty years ago?!—*Tender* by Sofia Samatar, *All Our Relations* by Tanya Talaga. I just finished (and loved) *Moccasin Square Gardens* by Richard Van Camp, *Confessions of a Pagan Nun* by Kate Horsley, and Sewyard Goodhand's *Even That Wildest Hope*. I keep the poetry of Tracy K. Smith and Don Domanski on my nightstand.

COVID-19 and Bookshops

Jorge Carrión
Translated from the Spanish by Peter Bush

Sant Jordi, Catalonia's day of books and roses, the day when Cervantes and Shakespeare died 404 years ago, World Book Day—this April 23, 2020, will be one of the strangest in our lifetime. Because the books and flowers given as gifts, the book-shops spilling out onto street stalls, and the fiestas energizing bodies and cities belong to the shared world of the senses, the world of hugs and crowds. And April 23, 2020, will take place on webpages and social media, cell phones and computer screens. Some of us will be fortunate enough to kiss and exchange books inside the same house. But many will be physically isolated. Anyone intending to use a messenger service to obtain their book or rose should ask themselves,

before clicking: do I really want to remember that this came to me via a man wearing gloves and a mask, a man compelled to endanger his life in exchange for a pittance?

My response was that I didn't, which is why I have already bought my books directly from my favourite bookshops. I'll collect them as soon as confinement ends. I imagine I will always remember that moment: re-encountering my booksellers, as I will always remember the first time we returned to the park or beach. Both libelista.com and todostuslibros.com are two good tools for making those purchases, investing today so that the bookshops will be there tomorrow.

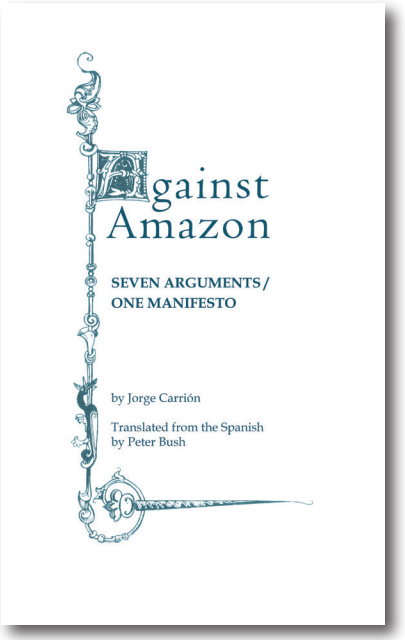
Now that this force majeure has closed bookshops, all the players in the book industry have reminded us of their importance. The best support initiatives for booksellers have come from publishers like Comanegra or Nórdica, on whose webpages you can buy books and indicate which bookshop you want to receive the 30 or 35 percent of their cost. The Barcelona publishing house calls the program "Adopt a bookshop"; Nórdica's Madrid bookshop adds, "Bookshops, we miss you. And we want you to return. Every single one."

Less successful are the #LlibreriesObertes projects, from the Mortensen design studio and Som publishing group, and #YoApoyoALasLibrerías ("I Support Bookshops"), from the Penguin Random House group. Both campaigns are palpably suspect. While the llibreriesobertes.cat page has helped many small Catalan bookshops sell books in advance and gain small amounts of liquidity, the Mortenson and Som initiative retains half of their income until the shops reopen and holds onto all data from the transactions. Under the guise of storytelling (the central theme being altruism) the companies have obtained a substantial injection of capital and Big Data from thousands of Catalan readers.

And the giant PRH group, while organizing a generous special distribution service so bookshops can sell titles from lists like

Lumen, Reservoir Books, and Grijalbo, has at the same time boosted the direct sale of books through its webpage. The contradiction is obvious. When you find a book that interests you at megustaleer.com, you're given six purchasing options: via that website, todostuslibros.com, amazon.es, casadelli-bro.com, Fnac, and El Corte Inglés. Perhaps that's because all those conglomerate options are equally valid in the eyes of the corporation; although it is currently distributing coupons for a 10 percent discount in bookshops once they reopen, it has removed the hashtag #YoApoyoALasLibrerías from Twitter. It has, however, retained #YoMeQuedoEnCasaLeyendo ("I Stay at Home Reading"), which is undoubtedly closer to the truth.

Llibreries Obertes could have directly supported Catalan bookshops that have webpages set up for electronic sales. PRH could have done the same with pages like todostuslibros.com, which assemble the information necessary to buy directly from thousands of Spanish bookshops. At the moment of truth—the moment of this pandemic—neither large enterprises nor the people responsible for cultural policy are reacting adequately to the situation. Nor, I fear, are bookshops, which aren't organizing or uniting at a time when their existence is truly threatened. Some dispatch books to private homes and others don't; some are still communicating with their community through Instagram, or have digitized their educational courses on Zoom, like the Rafael Alberti in Madrid or Nollegiu in Barcelona, though many haven't. A few, like 80 Mundos in Alicante, have ventured into crowdfunding; others, like Caótica in Sevilla, have advertised for financial partners in order to survive, but most haven't done these things.

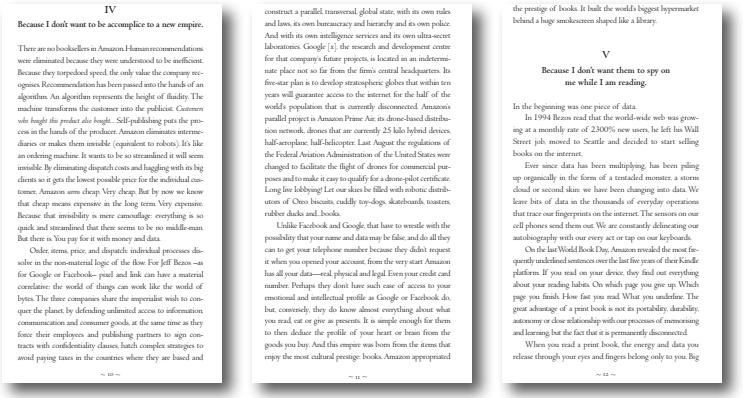


Cover of the Against Amazon chapbook that became an indie darling in 2017.

Although the pandemic hit Spain two weeks before it reached the US, the few Spanish bookshops organizing fundraising

campaigns or issuing calls for help did so after City Lights had already started to do just that. The legendary Beat bookshop, founded in 1953 by Lawrence Ferlinghetti (who turned 101 on March 24) quickly amassed half a million dollars. At the end of last year, Lam Wing Kee, the Hong Kong bookseller, crowd-funded 180,000 euros in order to launch his new bookshop in Taiwan. Lam was one of the five booksellers arrested by the Chinese government in 2015 in Hong Kong for selling and sending out banned books. Thirty police burst into his shop, Causeway Bay Books. On April 25, he will launch the new base for his project in Taipei. There will be no party; the Taiwanese government advises against social gatherings.

Why do people donate money to Caótica, 80 Mundos, City Lights, or Causeway Bay Books? Because they believe in the key nature of their brands and narratives. Design studios, media agencies, and marketing departments use the word "bookshop" in their campaigns because it is an excellent brand. Corporate promotion



IV

Because I don't want to be accomplice to a new empire.

There are no booksellers in Amazon. Human recommendations were eliminated because they were understood to be inefficient. Because they torpedoed speed, the only value the company recognises. Recommendation has been passed into the hands of an algorithm. An algorithm represents the height of fluidity. The machine transforms the customer into the publicist. *Customers who bought this product also bought...* Self-publishing puts the process in the hands of the producer. Amazon eliminates intermediaries or makes them invisible (equivalent to robots). It's like an ordering machine. It wants to be so streamlined it will seem invisible. By eliminating dispatch costs and haggling with its big clients so it gets the lowest possible price for the individual customer, Amazon *sems* cheap. Very cheap. But by now we know that cheap means expensive in the long term. Very expensive. Because that invisibility is mere camouflage: everything is so quick and streamlined that there seems to be no middle-man. But there is. You pay for it with money and data.

Order, items, price, and dispatch: individual processes dissolve in the non-material logic of the flow. For Jeff Bezos –as for Google or Facebook– pixel and link can have a material correlative: the world of things can work like the world of bytes. The three companies share the imperialist wish to conquer the planet, by defending unlimited access to information, communication and consumer goods, at the same time as they force their employees and publishing partners to sign contracts with confidentiality clauses, hatch complex strategies to avoid paying taxes in the countries where they are based and

~ 10 ~

construct a parallel, transversal, global state, with its own rules and laws, its own bureaucracy and hierarchy and its own police. And with its own intelligence services and its own ultra-secret laboratories. Google [x], the research and development centre for that company's future projects, is located in an indeterminate place not so far from the firm's central headquarters. Its five-star plan is to develop stratospheric globes that within ten years will guarantee access to the internet for the half of the world's population that is currently disconnected. Amazon's parallel project is Amazon Prime Air, its drone-based distribution network. drones that are currently 2.5 kilo hybrid devices, half-aeroplane, half-helicopter. Last August the regulations of the Federal Aviation Administration of the United States were changed to facilitate the flight of drones for commercial purposes and to make it easy to qualify for a drone-pilot certificate. Long live lobbying! Let our skies be filled with robotic distributors of Oreo biscuits, cuddly toy-dogs, skateboards, toasters, rubber ducks and...books.

Unlike Facebook and Google, that have to wrestle with the possibility that your name and data may be false, and do all they can to get your telephone number because they didn't request it when you opened your account, from the very start Amazon has all your data—real, physical and legal. Even your credit card number. Perhaps they don't have such ease of access to your emotional and intellectual profile as Google or Facebook do, but, conversely, they do know almost everything about what you read, eat or give as presents. It is simple enough for them to then deduce the profile of your heart or brain from the goods you buy. And this empire was born from the items that enjoy the most cultural prestige: books. Amazon appropriated

~ 11 ~

the prestige of books. It built the world's biggest hypermarket behind a huge smokescreen shaped like a library.

V

Because I don't want them to spy on me while I am reading.

In the beginning was one piece of data.

In 1994 Bezos read that the world-wide web was growing at a monthly rate of 2300% new users. he left his Wall Street job, moved to Seattle and decided to start selling books on the internet.

Ever since data has been multiplying, has been piling up organically in the form of a tentacled monster, a storm cloud or second skin: we have been changing into data. We leave bits of data in the thousands of everyday operations that trace our fingerprints on the internet. The sensors on our cell phones send them out. We are constantly delineating our autobiography with our every act or tap on our keyboards.

On the last World Book Day, Amazon revealed the most frequently underlined sentences over the last five years of their Kindle platform. If you read on your device, they find out everything about your reading habits. On which page you give up. Which page you finish. How fast you read. What you underline. The great advantage of a print book is not its portability, durability, autonomy or close relationship with our processes of memorising and learning, but the fact that it is permanently disconnected.

When you read a print book, the energy and data you release through your eyes and fingers belong only to you. Big

~ 12 ~

Against Amazon chapbook interior.

experts know you must never associate your brand with a less prestigious one, that all alliances must be based on equality or aspiration. The moment you link your brand to the word "bookshop," you harness positive attitudes from many, many people and automatically grab the attention of the mass media and social networks. Bookshops are part of our heritage, but they can also go viral.

Amazon was the first to appropriate the legitimacy, importance, and significance of books and bookshops, exactly a quarter of a century ago. What Jeff Bezos identified in the mid-nineties as a niche market, a sales space that hadn't been picked up by any electronic trading enterprise, was—conversely—the culture and intellectual and emotional fatherland for millions of individuals. Ten years later Google Books arrived on the scene with the same eagerness to appropriate that extraordinarily valuable symbolic cul-

tural capital. Despite the proliferation of books and films about booksellers and bookshops; despite photographs of bookish spaces and reading moments going viral on social media; despite the transformation of several bookshops around the world into tourist icons, bookshops don't seem to have grasped that their brand is extremely powerful, and much more so than those of the giant publishing groups and distributors supplying them, or the political institutions regulating them. Much bigger, even, than Google Books or Amazon. But they have to react. The huge tech companies are earning vast sums of money in these catastrophic times, which they are investing in strategies to render themselves—they hope—even more indispensable. Every day more brains are monopolized by Jeff Bezos, whose aim isn't to be the prime, but the only option.

Obviously there isn't the same structure of grants for sup-porting culture in the Hispanic world as exists in Anglo-Saxon culture. The Book Trade Charity has been helping booksellers for 180 years and has just raised over £50,000, to be distributed in the form of scholarships, for those affected by the pandemic. On March 23, 2020, three London publishers created a crowd-funding project to help bookshops. Their aim was to reach £10,000, a figure that rose to £100,000 in just a few days after they received the support of the Booksellers Association and—voilà—of Penguin Random House. But I refuse to accept that structures of solidarity, creativity, or innovation don't also exist within our culture.

The renowned Chinese actor Yao Chen shared with his 83 million followers on the Weibo social network a moving post by the director of the OWSpace bookshop chain, who confessed that they might go bankrupt in six months: "Our hope is that every individual and bookshop will finally emerge from this solitude and embrace the Spring." And the bookshop lover Aakanksha Gaur, owner of the Shelfjoy Instagram account, has created the Save Your Bookstore app, where you can find thousands of bookshops across the world, and purchase their gift tokens with one click.

In these times when millions of us are under house arrest and missing our bookshops, millions of isolated, masked readers who—though communicating via WhatsApp, working on Skype, and devouring stories on Netflix and HBO—have found ideas, escapism, and above all consolation, in our excess of books, bookshops need to react vigorously. They need to re-appropriate the culture of the book. Become conscious of their prestige and power. Ensure their brand and story are valued. What's at stake is their future, which, to a considerable extent, is our future, too.

From *Against Amazon and Other Essays* (Biblioasis, 2020)

An Interview with *CNQ* Editor Emily Donaldson

It always surprises me how many people don't know about* CNQ: Canadian Notes & Queries*. Sometimes we get an email from a librarian or bookseller or reader who lost sight of the journal back in the Fetherling era (i.e., the '80s and '90s) and had no idea what they were missing. For those who don't know about it, or haven't read it in a while, can you tell us a little bit about the magazine?

It surprises me too! But for those unlucky folk who don't know it, I'd be happy to bridge an introduction, if you'll first let me bore you with a quick historical slide show. *CNQ* was begun in the late '60s and modelled, like so much in Canadian life, on two pre-existing journals: *British Notes & Queries* and *American Notes & Queries*. It started life as essentially a pamphlet—a hand-typed, xeroxed, stapled sheaf of paper distributed inside the newsletter of the Canadian Antiquarian Booksellers' Association. Its initial function was as a kind of proto-Reddit: people, academics primarily, would send in questions about various, mostly literary, topics which would hopefully be answered by other learneds in the next issue. Sometimes, for a touch of spice, the paper on which it was printed would be coloured.

Our tagline, "Books, culture, a backward glance" is partly a nod to that origin story. Our main focus is books; as literature, certainly, but also as objects of cultural importance. In fact, two of our regular contributors are antiquarian booksellers—Stephen Fowler and David Mason—and both bring a unique, and uniquely witty, eye to an important, and in our estimation, oft-neglected aspect of Canadian culture: books and bookselling. Every issue is also prefaced with our "What's Old" column, a roundup of books coming back into print, or new editions, as well as interesting books by

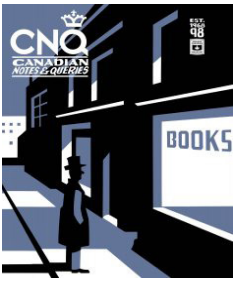
antiquarian booksellers from around the country—rare books, first editions, etc.

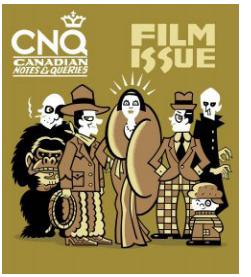
We're also interested in reassessing what, for want of a more exciting term, you might call our literary heritage. As someone somewhere might once have said: Those who don't learn from their literature are doomed to rewrite it, or something like that ... To that end, long-time contributor Brian Busby has a column, "The Dusty Bookcase," that looks at Canada's neglected, suppressed, and forgotten writing. Now I'll come clean and say that the duds far outweigh the hidden gems here—some of the books are painfully bad—but that's also what makes the column great, and one of our most popular. Brian is incredibly funny, and in actually reading these books he's basically doing the Lord's work. Or at least performing a national service.

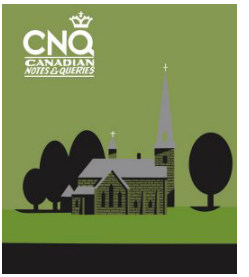
We also publish short fiction, poetry, essays, and reviews of new Canadian books of all genres. We'll do a deep dive on a single author's entire body of work—André Alexis, Rachel Cusk, and Russell Smith being some recent examples. We also have a First Reading column where we invite writers, many of whom are BIPOC, younger, or newer Canadian, to assess established or so-called canonical works of CanLit with fresh critical eyes.

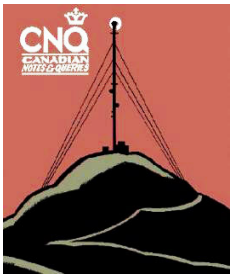
Can you talk a bit about the magazine's unique look? Why is there nothing on the cover about what's inside?

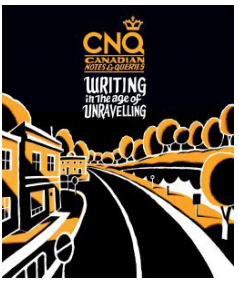
Our design comes courtesy of Seth—award-winning graphic novelist, and national treasure—who designs every cover and who also has his own column, "The Landscape," which visually features items from his vast and beautiful collection of paper ephemera: matchbooks, farming booklets, statistical handbooks, old photos. Seth is also responsible for











"The North Wing," a long running piece subtitled "Selections from the lost library of CanLit graphic novels," in which he commissions a graphic novelist to render, in cartoon form, a scene of their choosing from a work of CanLit.

As for the textless covers, we've been told repeatedly by experts in the field that these amount to marketing hara kiri. They are likely correct. But we persist because we consider the covers works of art. It's also the least we can do for Seth, who does them for a pittance of what he does a *New Yorker* cover for. He's on record as saying *CNQ* is his favourite gig because we don't tell him what to do. I'm still not telling him what to do, so hopefully that's still the case.

You've now been editing* CNQ *for five years. What's been the biggest challenge you've faced over this time? The things you're most proud of?

Our biggest challenge is likely the same challenge for all literary mags: trying to publish quality work, bring in new voices, vet a torrent of submissions, and have some kind of digital presence with a miniscule staff and budget.

Another challenge has been getting diverse voices in the magazine, specifically when it comes to literary criticism. I get a ton of submissions from white dudes, many of them excellent, but only a handful from women, and even fewer from people of colour. I realize there are some logical reasons for this. Anecdotally it seems that women are in general more loath to get critical and to promote themselves and their work; the vast majority of writing submitted by women is in the form of memoir and poetry. Part of it may also have to do with the magazine's history; for a long time we had the justifiable reputation of being a white male bastion.

My experience has been, and I've heard similar things from other editors, that if you want to bring in new, diverse voices you need to do the work of going out and looking for them. Invite a writer to write and generally you won't be turned down; people really appreciate being asked. Earlier in the year I asked Souvankham Thammavongsa, whose poetry we'd previously published (and who just won the Giller for her amazing book of stories, *How to Pronounce Knife*), if she'd be interested in writing an essay about rereading, and she responded ... with an actual essay! The piece is in the upcoming issue and is about the experience of reading "Rumpelstiltskin" after arriving in Canada as a young Lao refugee. Everyone should read it.

Dealing with, and occasionally rising to these challenges is probably the thing I'm most proud of. Also sprucing up the magazine visually: I brought in colour, more artwork and photography, and introduced a few new columns, including "What's Old," "First Reading," and "Exhumations." We also brought in a new poetry editor, Madhur Anand, a poet, author, and prof with her ear to the ground who's been bringing in some fresh new voices. I'm also proud of what I think of as our big-leagues editorial process. We definitely punch above our weight in that regard. Our writers don't get rich, but they end up with sparkling work they can be proud of, and that helps prop up what feels like a steadily atrophying non-academic critical landscape. Or so I keep telling myself.

To that last point: there's a lot of hand-wringing, at least in certain online forums, about the death of critical culture in Canada. It's certainly true that many of the primary traditional venues for critical coverage have either collapsed or become severely constrained, especially over the last year. (For my money, the best two remaining are the* Toronto Star *and* Winnipeg Free Press*: it amazes me what

each editor has been able to cover within the constraints in which they're working.) How do we combat this?

It's amazing how fast that critical culture is disappearing. Many magazines with literary content have folded and many of our major newspapers barely run reviews anymore, though as you say the *Star* still thankfully has skin in the game. Many that do run reviews require that they be "recommends"—which means you're not really taking a truly critical stance, you're just in the business of making Top Ten lists. If you're an author, that might make you breathe easy: if you get reviewed at all it's likely to be positive. That said, the chances of being reviewed in Canada these days, especially for first-time authors, is incredibly slim. You're more likely to just be ignored. So what do we lose? I think fewer critical reviews in the public sphere ghettoizes the intellectual discussion of books into the silo of academia, or into private book clubs, which, in my experience, are mostly about drinking wine.

How to mitigate against this? I really don't know. It could be that people are losing their critical muscles, or at least their appetite for this kind of writing. What we've done at *CNQ* is basically quadruple or quintuple our book reviews section in the last two years. And we don't ask that the reviews be positive. We've since been inundated with review requests from publishers and authors, the vast majority of which I don't have time to even reply to. It's sobering proof of the important role that we, a small lit journal, increasingly find ourselves inhabiting.

Beyond just reviews we're also a space for non-academic literary criticism: that is, intelligent writing about books aimed at the common, well-read reader, that doesn't peddle in painful jargon or the ponderous and obscure. Which isn't to say we don't publish academics: we do, and many have told us how relieved they are to

be able to let their freak flag fly, to purge, among many others, the word "discourse" from their writing.

What's the role of the small circulation print critical journal in an increasingly digital landscape?

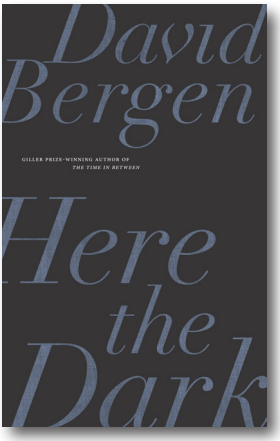
A difficult one! We like to think of *CNQ* as a kind of oasis for those who still value print, and the tactile, but the truth is that we can't avoid the digital realm. And so we keep a poorly maintained website, and an intermittent social media presence. The combination of shrinking numbers of bookstores and magazine stands plus Covid hasn't exactly made things easier, but we persist.

What effect, if any, has the pandemic had on the magazine?

It's led to an avalanche of submissions. Apparently people have been spending their lockdown time thinking and writing and pitching, which is great. The challenge, again, has been trying to get more work online with reduced and overworked staff. One positive thing that's come directly out of the pandemic is a new column, "Shelf Talkers," in which we invite independent booksellers from all around the country to submit lists and descriptions of their favourite recent Canadian titles. We conceived it as a way of supporting indies in a trying time, but the results were so good—we ran six in the recent issue and there was almost no overlap between entries, as we feared might be the case—that we now plan to make it a regular feature. Part of the reason for the lack of overlap might be that "top," in this case, doesn't mean bestselling: it means the titles that staff and customers enjoyed the most, or view as as-yet undiscovered gems. You can see the result in our upcoming Winter issue, which also features an expanded reviews section, a fierce essay on political correctness in CanLit reviewing by Shane Nielson, and a terrific piece on the subversive power of women's domestic art by a new contributor, Mikka Jacobsen.

*

Recent Critical Attention

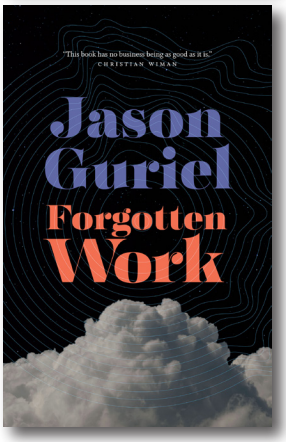


HERE THE DARK
David Bergen

"Sexual loneliness and moral confusion pull at the delicately wrought characters in David Bergen's latest work, a story collection of masterly skill and tension. His third appearance on the Giller shortlist—including the 2005 winner, *The Time in Between*—affirms Bergen among Canada's most powerful writers. His pages light up; all around falls into darkness."—2020 Scotiabank Giller Prize Jury

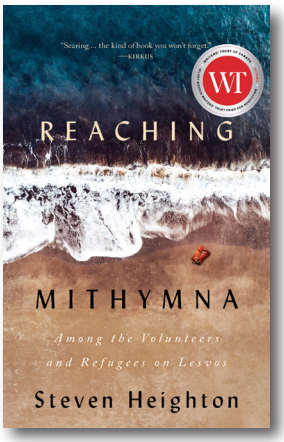
STOOP CITY
Kristyn Dunnion

"Kristyn Dunnion. *Stoop City*. What an assured and variegated collection of stories. Set in Toronto and small-town southern Ontario, Kristyn Dunnion's thirteen short pieces are marvellous feats of pacing and styling bolstered by vibrant characterization and enviable turns of phrase."—Brett Josef Grubisic, *Quill & Quire* (starred review)



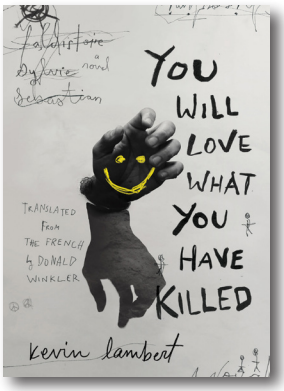
FORGOTTEN WORK
Jason Guriel

"A futuristic dystopian rock novel in rhymed couplets, this rollicking book is as unlikely, audacious and ingenious as the premise suggests: 'And then he plays some chords that sound both odd / and somehow right, as if unlocked by God.'"—*New York Times*



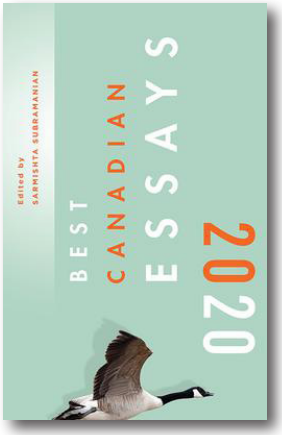
REACHING MITHYMNA
Steven Heighton

"We know Steven Heighton as an award-winning poet and novelist. With *Reaching Mithymna*, he emerges as an indelible nonfiction writer. Combining his poetic sensibilities and storytelling skills with a documentarian's eye, he has created a wrenching narrative from the front lines of the Syrian refugee crisis. In 2015, Heighton travelled to Greece, his mother's homeland, equipped with a duffel bag, a notebook, and a conscience. *Reaching Mithymna* is a heart-rending story of humanity and sacrifice by a writer who put his own life on hold in a desperate and often futile attempt to help shipwrecked strangers find a safe and secure future for themselves and their children."
—Hilary Weston Writers' Trust Prize for Nonfiction Jury Citation.



YOU WILL LOVE WHAT YOU HAVE KILLED
Kevin Lambert

"The impact and reach of Lambert's writing is in part the result of old-fashioned narrative mastery ... With each act of violence, the reader is appalled—and appalled at not being surprised—and Lambert deftly has us hooked as the whole wreck painfully unfolds."
— Katia Grubisic, *Montreal Review of Books*



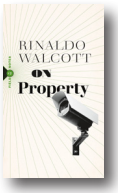
BEST CANADIAN ESSAYS 2020
ed. Sarmishta Subramanian

"A superb collection of national thinkers, crackling with insight on the issues of the age: dating on apps while living with your parents; how Palestinian activism is swallowed by free speech wars; the value of beauty as a form of resistance; and just what we're supposed to do with Michael Jackson."— Casey Plett, *Chatelaine.*

Forthcoming: January - March 2020

Keath Fraser, *Charity: A Novella*

"An obliquely teasing novella offering style and insight…" —*Kirkus Reviews*



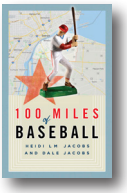
Rinaldo Walcott, *On Property* **(Field Notes # 2)**

An examination of the connection between race and property and a defence of abolition as the only path to true equality.

Mia Couto, *Sea Loves Me: Selected Stories*

"A career-spanning collection from the Mozambican writer, seeking an intersection between his country's folklore and its colonial past. …A worthy … introduction to a unique and atmospheric African writer's work." —*Kirkus Reviews*

Dale Jacobs and Heidi LM Jacobs, *100 Miles of Baseball: Fifty Games, One Summer*



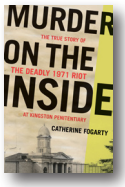
"*100 Miles of Baseball* is about endurance, nostalgia, hope, and gratitude, and is a book that handily affirms the game's very best rule—that baseball is for everyone."—Stacey May Fowles, author of *Baseball Life Advice*

Andri Snær Magnason, *On Time and Water*

"Haunting ... Andri Snær Magnason's perspective on his country's environment is unique and compelling."—Erica Wagner, *Economist*

Russell Banks, *Foregone*

"Foregone is a subtle meditation on a life composed of half-forgotten impulses and their endless consequences ... In the rages of a sick old man profound questions arise—what is a life? A self? And what is lost when truth destroys the fabrications that sustain other lives?"—Marilynne Robinson, author of *Gilead*



Catherine Fogarty, *Murder on the Inside: The True Story of the Deadly Riot at Kingston Penitentiary*

"Catherine Fogarty's page-turner is a story of social and political failure ... She's found fascinating heroes and moral cowards in places you won't expect. And, when you think you've reached the end of the story, Fogarty will show you injustice upon injustice."—Mark Bourrie, author of *Bush Runner: The Adventures of Pierre-Espirit Radisson*

Biblioasis
1686 Ottawa Street, Suite 100
Windsor, Ontario, Canada

READ INDEPENDENTLY
BIBLIOASIS