THE BIBLIO PHILE

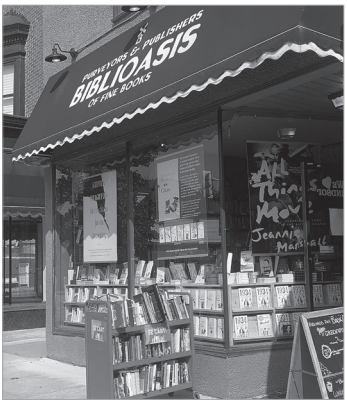
N°6

NEWS FROM THE MANSE ★ IMPORTED FROM SOUTH DETROIT

THE 6 BIBLIOPHILE

News from the Bibliomanse

SOME FEATURES IN THIS ISSUE



L *to* R: *1520 Wyandotte & 1686 Ottawa: where (some of) the magic happens.*

IN JULY 2023, BIBLIOASIS Bookshop celebrated twenty-five years since we first flipped our door sign to open: as we enter the second month of 2024, it means I've now spent more than a quarter century as a bookseller; but it also means that I've been one now more than half my life. Even acknowledging the confounding way time moves, this doesn't seem possible. I still feel far too young; as if I am only really beginning to understand bookselling and its various possibilities and responsibilities; as if I am only now, finally, getting my bearings. I've always been a slow learner. Part of the problem, perhaps, is that Biblioasis Bookshop was supposed to fail, as my mother and many others (including myself) prophesied; it was supposed to be a way to work books out of my blood once and for all; or, perhaps, to serve as a way to bide my time until I wrote my own. It has been none of these things, but has instead opened worlds I had no idea were possible.

But this is not the only anniversary we're celebrating: 2024 also marks the twentieth anniversary of Biblioasis Press, and this, even more than the bookshop, I find wondrously strange. It's made me even more backward-glancing than usual: forgive me in advance any sentimental trespasses. I have described myself repeatedly as an accidental publisher, which is true: like most people, I didn't give much thought to publishing or to who published the books I read and loved and sold until I'd been a bookseller for a few years. Even then, how I would have understood what publishing involved differs immeasurably from what it's come to mean to me since. But

this now twenty-year accident has resulted in the publication of over 400 books and nearly forty issues of *Canadian Notes & Queries* (*CNQ*), almost all of which I'd have no problem committing to again; it's brought together writers from all over the world, from Angola and Argentina and Canada and Côte d'Ivoire and Croatia and England and Guatemala and Hungary and Iceland and Ireland and Mozambique and Norway and Romania and Scotland and Serbia and Spain and the United States, among many other places, all of them now rubbing shoulders on the shelves behind me, in bookshops across North America, and in the pages of our catalogue. And it's brought all of us together with you, wherever you are and in whatever format you're reading this, and it doesn't matter how long I do this: that still seems akin to magic.

There is a note affixed to my office door from another Canadian publisher (Andrew Steeves of Gaspereau Press), sent to me by another Canadian publisher (Jack David, ECW) at a moment of despair, and affixed there by one of the many friends I have made in this strange place (Vanessa Stauffer, from Biblioasis), a note that I read almost every day before I cross my office threshold: "Our profession can be tricky, yes. But by god, I get up every morning excited by what I do and by the shape it makes in my life, in my community's life and in the world. There are not enough days in a life to exhaust my curiosity and enthusiasm for publishing. The mistakes and problems are just mistakes and problems. They don't quiet the mirth."

I've made my share of mistakes over the past quarter century, and I am sure that there are more in my future; there are certainly more than enough problems to fill my days. But what I remain increasingly grateful for is the unexpected shape bookselling and publishing have lent my life, for those of you who have helped to give it said shape, for the books that continue to excite, and for the opportunity to share this enthusiasm with all of you; for how much that I still, slowly or otherwise, have to learn. And for the mirth, too. Here's hoping for at least twenty-five years more of all of it.

DAN WELLS
WINDSOR, ONTARIO
JANUARY 31, 2024

DANNY CAINE AND JOSH COOK IN CONVERSATION WITH DAN WELLS

IN OCTOBER 2023, ON the eve of Heartland Fall Forum (a regional conference for booksellers in and around the midwest), DANNY CAINE (co-owner of Raven Books) and JOSH COOK (co-owner of Porter Square Books) joined us at Biblioasis Bookshop for the Windsor launch of Cook's essay collection, *The Art of Libromancy*. This long awaited conversation about contemporary bookselling was led by our very own DAN WELLS. We're delighted to bring it to you here, faithfully transcribed and edited by EMILY MERNIN.

DAN WELLS, BIBLIOASIS: *I picked Josh up at the train station and brought him to John King Books, which I have to do for everyone who comes here. You've been, Danny, haven't you?*

DANNY CAINE, RAVEN BOOKSTORE: Yes, and going again tomorrow.

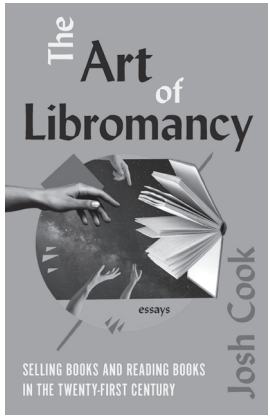
DW: *Good. It's a necessary stop. I was saying to Josh that I think your books complement each other. Though there is no real way to separate booksellers and bookselling from bookstores, you each come at the question of bookselling at the present moment from different perspectives. Josh, your book* The Art of Libromancy *focusses on the art of bookselling and booksellers. And Danny your book focusses more on the bookstores themselves, if always through the lens of the booksellers you are in conversation with. There's that line that came out of the pandemic that is central to both of your understanding: "The future of bookselling is booksellers." So I thought we could start this conversation by unpacking this idea.*

JOSH COOK, PORTER SQUARE BOOKS: I would've worn the t-shirt if I had known it was going to be the first question. It's one of those ideas that the first thing that you say when you hear it for the first time, well, what else would it be? But, there is a distinction between bookstores and booksellers and bookstore owners and booksellers. Sometimes that distinction is very stark, at larger stores where there are many more people working. Sometimes that distinction is very thin, as is the case when the bookstore owner is the same person doing all of the work, and the only difference

L *to* R: *Danny Caine and Josh Cook in Biblioasis Bookshop.*

between them and their employees is that one of them can be fired. Which is a pretty big difference. When you start digging into how bookstores are going to be not just sustainable but thriving to the extent where everyone who is working in them is making a liveable wage, which is not the case now, one of the central ideas in my book is the best way to do that, to thrive, is to support the people who are doing the actual selling of the books, the people who are in conversation with readers and telling the story of the bookstore to their community and the wider world. That is a different focus than necessarily always finding out ways to pay fewer credit card fees. Those are important. But I don't think these will be the difference between surviving and thriving. They may be the difference between surviving and not surviving. But when we think about a world of bookstores where everyone working in those bookstores can afford to only do that and can afford to do it without having to cram extra roommates into their apartments, or make tough financial choices, I think that starts with specifically supporting them, letting the work they do in their communities create the sales that will then support them financially.

DC: I was just talking about how much I am enjoying being on this book tour because every event feels really fresh and specific to the store I am in. During my last event, I spent a long time talking about Amazon. Dan was like, I don't even have an Amazon question, and



L: *Josh Cook;* R: *cover design by Michel Vrana.*

I was like: I'll find a way to bring it up, and here I am in the first part of my first answer, I am going to talk about Amazon. I spent the last three and a half years researching, touring, talking about, and writing about Amazon. That's a long time to focus on what I think people are doing wrong. In my own business, I decided I was going to try to do things right. At least in my own corner of Lawrence, Kansas, how can I course correct? If I am so focussed on what is wrong with Amazon as a workplace, what are the steps I can take to make this a great place to work? I would love to see every bookstore owner asking those questions. I am encouraged to see a lot of folks who are having those conversations. Do we have to have this reputation of bookselling being a low-paying job, that is extremely difficult, that you do for a couple years before you move onto your real job? That is no way to retain talented people. When you compare bookstores to Amazon, the strongest asset we have that they don't is people. You can walk into a bookstore and have a wonderful conversation with a bookseller about books, feel like you are part of the community, meet the amazing people who work at that store, and that is wonderful, I love that. I spend all day everyday with booksellers, and I still love to meet more of them. It is the one thing we've got that Amazon doesn't. We should be working to retain them and develop talent, and make it something that can at least be a career. The better the booksellers, the better the bookstore. If you have a central core of motivated, committed, talented booksellers, a lot of other things will fall into place. People

L: *Cover design by Joe Biel;* R: *Danny Caine.*

will just fall in love with your bookstore and your community.

DW: *The title of your new book, Danny, is* How to Protect Bookstores and Why. *As you raise in the introduction, the idea that bookstores are something that need protection is probably surprising to some people, including, I expect, other booksellers. So* do *bookstores need protecting, and why?*

DC: Ha, yes. It is an interesting story about the title. I got together with my publisher Microcosm Publishing, who I love working with. Like Biblioasis, they are another innovative independent publisher doing really interesting work. I wanted to do a sequel. When you have a book that is a hit, you start to think about what comes next. I knew I wanted to write a positive story that focussed more on bookstores. The folks at Microcosm were on board, and I was having a discussion about how to frame this book, and brainstorming with the editor-in-chief, Joe Biel. He was like, what if we called it *How to Save Bookstores and Why*? And I was like, I don't like that at all, I don't think bookstores need to be saved. I think bookstores would resent being told they need to be saved. So I was like, "How about protect? I don't love it, but we'll go with it as a working title, and as I research I will come up with a better idea." This was before this wave of book banning in the US took off, before a lot of bookstores that opened during the pandemic began to close down, before inflation happened and the economy cooled. More and more as I researched this book and talked to people, including a store in

Washington, DC, that was physically attacked during a drag story hour, I was convinced that bookstores do need protecting. Not just in an economic sense, but sometimes in a physical sense. In talking to the 20–25 booksellers (including Dan) who contributed to my book, I realized these are spaces that provide economic value to their communities, but they also provide so much more, and they need protection to be able to do those things. My book is composed of stories from these amazing and inspiring bookstores, but also suggestions about how to build a world where bookstores don't have to work so hard. Or, they can work really hard on the stuff they love and less hard on the figuring out how to keep the Proud Boys outside and the kids inside with the drag performer. I didn't love the idea at first. But as I researched the book, I grew into it, and now I am 100 percent convinced it is the right title.

JC: One of the things that became clear, from Danny's book especially, but other research as well, is that the conditions that make bookselling difficult are policy decisions made by people out to support other businesses. I've never heard of any local bookstore, or any other local business, getting fifteen years of property tax-free ownership of their space. Never heard of it. Or interest-free loans. Or getting their zoning regulations waived so they can renovate without having to go through red tape. But Amazon gets all of those things. Walmart gets them. And once you start peeling back some significant policy decisions, in some ways, bookstores need protecting from the very institutions that are supposed to be protecting them. Stepping back and seeing how none of this is bound by the laws of physics, these are all things that can be changed, that are all results of decisions that people made. We can come to different conclusions, and adjust our course. One of the things that Danny's book does is lay out small, individual things we can do, but also the types of decisions we could make at a policy level, that would go worlds towards the type of bookstore world we would like to see.

DW: *Another series of books we do at Biblioasis is a pamphlet series called Field Notes. One of the future Field Notes is* On Resilience, *and one of the arguments that this author—who was in New Orleans after the*

hurricane—argues is that this big corporate investment—in battery plants, for example, here in Windsor, Ontario—is not the best way to invest in communities. If you actually invested in infrastructure and small businesses, there is plenty of evidence to show you would get more bang for your buck. I think this is an argument we need to start making much more loudly.

You both have listed various challenges facing bookstores, from cultural, to political, to economic. If you have to pick one each, what would be the biggest challenge you think is facing bookstores—independent or otherwise—at the current moment.

JC: One of the biggest challenges is that all of these things are intertwined, connected to each other, and hard to extract. For example, the thing I latch onto, at least in America, is the stagnation of wages since Ronald Reagan, roughly. Which has led to this cascading problem: people have less disposable income, which means they have less money to spend at retail stores like bookstores, therefore bookstores have less money and can afford to pay their booksellers less, leading to a cycle of depressing wages and income. This isn't the most diplomatic thing to say, but contemporary conservative ideology is the most challenging aspect of bookselling right now. There isn't a problem, in the United States anyway, that isn't created or made worse by that political ideology—whether it's wages, banning books and attacking bookstores, whether it's denying climate change, whether it's ensuring our schools are filled with guns. It's all that same ideology. It's difficult for bookstores to navigate all this while also being a commerce, capitalist centre. How do we deal with challenges that come from a specific ideology, that have certain policy implications, while still trying to be an open, welcoming space that isn't about having political arguments with everyone that walks in the door?

I don't know if there is a great way to navigate this problem. It's something I think about a lot. It's one of the reasons why I write so much about stock and how we choose what goes on our shelves, and how we need to think about the broader social, political, and economic implications of how we stock our shelves. Um, you want me to just say Amazon, too? Yeah, haha, it's tough. Maybe we'll figure it out tonight.

The next night, the tour moved across the river to Detroit's Source Booksellers. Pictured L to R: Janet Jones of Source, Josh, and Danny.

DC: What Josh said. Yes. I could easily just copy his answer but I won't.

One of the ideas I latched onto in writing my book comes from *The Radical Bookstore* by Kimberley Kinder. She argues that one of the benefits of an independent bookstore, especially as an activist space, is that it's permanent. Or more permanent than other activist spaces. You have a space that is safe from the elements, that has posted open/closing hours. There, you will always have access to texts that will help make the world a better place, if not also people that will help make the world a better place. On a permanent basis. Where a protest lasts a couple hours, a bookstore can last decades. I think one of the biggest challenges to bookstores today are roadblocks to that permanence.

There are very few silver bullet solutions. Perhaps cutting everybody's rent in half would make every bookseller in the world breathe easier. Even bookstores that own their space will breathe easier knowing that their fellow bookstores that are renting now have access to permanence, clearing a major financial hurdle.

I was in a spat with my landlord today, about some bullshit with the wood floor. Even well-established stores have to deal with landlords.

Not having enough money to open a bookstore. A rough calculation for inventory is seventy-five dollars per square foot. One

L *to* R: *Josh at Source with James Crossley of Leviathan Books (St Louis,* MO*).*

thousand square feet is considered a small bookstore. So, that is a lot of money for inventory. That's before you hire anyone, build bookshelves. It's a majorly expensive endeavour—unless you do it how Dan did—but I would argue that that's possible because of where the bookstore is. That's a Windsor magic that allowed Dan to grow this space, to buy this building. It was also not in this decade, where things have gotten a lot harder.

In addition to contemporary conservative ideology being a threat to everything we hold dear, I think the financial obstacle to getting to a place that you can reliably call permanent is a major problem. I would love to see booksellers get some help clearing those problems.

DW: *When I was first a bookseller, and then a new publisher, I tended to define myself as "literary." Looking back, I think this was really as much about saying what I wasn't as what I was. At a certain point, I became uncomfortable with that definition, and I began to define what we did in relation to our competition with conglomerates. I thought the word independent would be a much more central idea to how to define what we do as booksellers and publishers. Increasingly, I've become uncomfortable with this idea of independence. This is something you have both talked about. What is the problem with the common designation of the indie bookstore? What does this mean? What should indie/independent designate?*

DC: I think independent was useful in the way you described. It came to prominence in the 90s, when the big existential threats were Borders and Barnes & Noble. As a way to say we are something separate, something better, something smaller. I worry that the term has become too narrow. When people imagine independent bookstores, they imagine a certain kind of place, a certain kind of person that works there, a certain kind of person that shops there, a certain kind of neighborhood. I think one of the ideas I would like to push bookselling towards is to broaden the idea of what a bookstore is—who owns it, what it can do, its relationship to its community, its relationship to making money. If we hang on to the indie brand too much, we might lose on the possibilities for something like Baltimore's Red Emma's, an employee-owned co-op that is working really hard to export the gospel of employee-owned co-ops to other small businesses in Baltimore. Or like the rapper Noname's Radical Hood Library in Los Angeles, which is just a radical lending library—a bookstore that doesn't make money. These are really interesting experiments to me. They don't fit into the traditional model of independent bookstores. When you use the term, there is no explicit definition of independent bookstore, but when you use the term long enough, it threatens to get a little stale.

Also, I think some of the answers to challenges we are facing are not about independence, but collectivity. Collectivity among employees, among bookstores, among a book industry as a whole that is facing an existential crisis. If you ask anybody but the Big Five CEOs, no one has enough money. And they'll probably say the same thing too. It can be so lonely when you are sitting in front of QuickBooks, trying to figure out how the hell you are going to make rent and payroll this month—I see business owners laughing at this one—and that is a moment I don't want to be independent. I want to be in this difficult game together with other people. I can get burned out if I am totally independent in the hardest moments of this job. If we hang on too much, I fear we'll lose collectivity.

My publisher wanted my book to be called *How to Protect Independent Bookstores.* And I said let's just change it to bookstores, and I'll explain why in the introduction.

JC: Some insider baseball. Whenever there are bookseller conferences, we all get together, we are doing educationals, looking at books, publishers are presenting. We'll get into rooms where we are having meetings and discussions. Every single meeting starts with the moderator reading an antitrust regulation that says we cannot collaborate on pricing, boycotts, or territories. Amazon has just now faced its first significant antitrust hurdle. My store of forty-two employees and Danny's store of fifteen employees are bound by antitrust legislation. It's a very strange thing to be looking at—and that's part of the reason I think independence can still be useful—if only as a bullhorn. Whenever you shout into a bullhorn, you lose some nuance. But at least it continues to make obvious the distinction that we are not Amazon. I really like the idea of looking towards collectivity somehow.

A lot of what we are seeing in the discussions around bookselling, and how bookstores are in better places than they were twenty years ago, is this informal collectivity that has been happening at the national education conference called Winter Institute, which brings together hundreds of booksellers from across the country, at regional conferences, and on social media. There is a collectivity now among booksellers that didn't exist ten years ago, and I'm excited to see where that will go. Obviously, without talking about pricing, boycotts, and territories.

DW: *It's really great to hear this. This is where I have been moving towards in my thinking, that this idea of independence is setting yourself up for failure.*

There are Winter Institute and regional conferences. Are there any other ways that small groups of independents can come together to work for their collective betterment? What does that actually look like on a day-to-day basis?

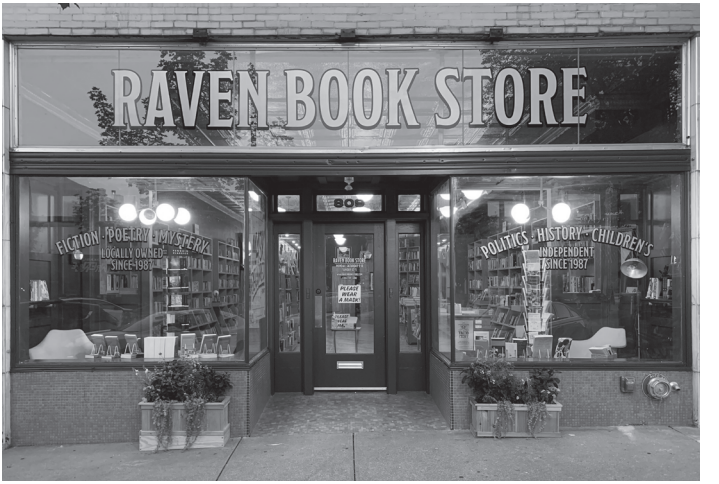
DC: I would say employee ownership. Or collective ownership. Or anything that gestures away from the divide between sole owner and the group of people that work for them. To complicate that, especially with some sort of ownership stake. Our bookstore, The Raven, stole Porter Square Books's model for this gesture towards collective ownership, which has been a really interesting

Porter Square Books in Cambridge, MA.

experiment. Again, it's just a way to better reflect how the bookstore actually works. There is no way that I am the only person who makes this bookstore work, so why do I have control over what happens to the profit, when there are profits?

I think social media—like, I first befriended Josh on Twitter. That's why I think it is a crime what has happened to Twitter, what that reckless billionaire has done to a once thriving digital space. I think it remains to be seen how groups of booksellers online can gather, but I certainly think booksellers talking to each other is a good thing. I encourage my booksellers to get to know booksellers at other stores every chance they get. My book is largely pro-labour union. I think in certain contexts, that is the right move, when collectivity is needed and management is hostile to that idea. So, yeah, I think there are a lot of ways to do it. Every bookstore is different. There is no blanket way towards collectivity that will work for everyone.

For instance, the person who set up your employee ownership at Porter Books happened to be a lawyer, who could write all of his own materials and documents. When we set up ours, it felt like the system was telling us: "That's not how you do business, you aren't supposed to be trying to make less money." I had long meetings with my lawyer and my accountant—which are fun, because you have to pay for those meetings twice—where I pleaded, I know what I am doing, I understand what this means, I want to set up this



Raven Book Store in Lawrence, KS.

business differently. The whole system is set up so the workers on the bottom enrich the pockets of those on top. Any move against that, and you're swimming upstream. So, I am excited for the radical imagination of collective possibilities. I don't have the answers but I am certainly paying attention to people as they dream them up.

JC: There is an organization called Margins. Within themselves, they have a store that is specifically organizing around marginalized booksellers. They do events, education, and a conference. There is certainly a possibility there. Booksellers Without Borders, which brings booksellers together from all over as part of a bookseller exchange program. Just today, a new literary prize—the Cercador Prize—announced their finalists, which is selected entirely by booksellers. There's some possibility there too.

It is happening. Collectivity. But I think Danny's right. It is notable that this fascist-curious billionaire demolished the space where Black Lives Matter, Me Too, and so many other collective organizing was happening.

DW: *Two of the bookstores you profile in your book—Biblioasis and Two Dollar Radio—are both booksellers and publishers. I think there are obvious synergies that exist between independent publishers and booksellers. What can we do to support each other better in the work we are doing?*

(continued on p 49)

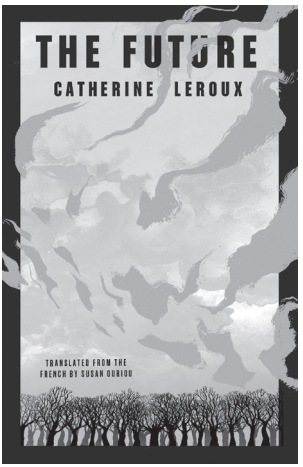
THE FUTURE

CATHERINE LEROUX

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY SUSAN OURIOU

We couldn't be more thrilled that *The Future*, by CATHERINE LEROUX (trans. SUSAN OURIOU), has been shortlisted for CBC Canada Reads 2024! It's our first shortlist selection, and we've been busy around the manse: coordinating appearances and travel, reprints and promotional materials, Instagram posts and partnerships with ECW and Arsenal Pulp, our fellow shortlisted indie presses.

Author Heather O'Neill will be defending the book for the 23rd competition, in which a panel of five celebrity advocates, each championing a Canadian book, participates in a daily round-table conversation culminating in one book being voted off the Canadian book island at a time until just one remains. Clearly our money is on Leroux's post-dystopic vision of an alternate version of Detroit in which the French never ceded their settlements and children rule over their own kingdom in the trees.



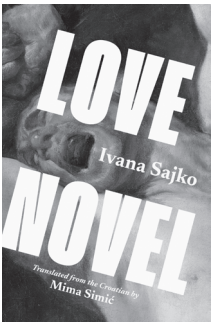
L: *Catherine Leroux (cr. Justine Latour);* R: *cover design by Natalie Olsen.*

"*The Future* takes place in a post-apocalyptic Detroit where everyone speaks French, which is super cool. It's the most magical response to the *Lord of the Flies*: you're going to meet a group of feral murderous children, whose meditations on life are so gorgeous, and absurd, and perverse that they are poetry. This wild group of children show us a model for a new society where everyone's dream life is equally important."

HEATHER O'NEILL,
Canada Reads champion
for *The Future*

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Mima Simić on translating Love Novel *by Ivana Sajko*



L *to* R: *Mima Simić; cover design by Jason Arias; Ivana Sajko.*

THERE'S A GAME I sometimes play in Berlin with my friends, expats from the country formerly known as Yugoslavia; we call it the Poverty Pentathlon. We rummage through our childhoods to come up with the most ridiculous—yet always true!—episodes of growing up in destitution. One of us lived without any heating in the house, warming herself at night with a stove-heated roofing tile. "Yeah, but you had a roof to take the tile off!" someone says, and she loses points. Another one had to move every couple of years, from one terrible landlord or lady to the next, intruding into their homes at will, much like swarms of bugs and insects out of the unfinished walls. Here one of us once got bitten by a scorpion, and her mother, a doctor, had to give her a tetanus shot right there, on that bed, a thin two-piece sponge that the whole family of four slept in. The marriage fell apart, there was a lot of shouting and screaming, once there was blood on their mother's nightgown, right down the middle, in line with her nose. There was no other room to put the kids in, so they watched in silence, swallowing the whimpers of their world ending.

The world of Ivana Sajko's *Love Novel* is my world, the world where we are all winners in this wretched competition, clutching our medals as our most precious possessions while they cut into our palms, extending our life lines. Sometimes these lines make for whole books.

Ivana's world being mine made the work of translation both easier and harder. It is not a long book, but it took me over a year to translate it—I broke many deadlines, too many promises, and

finally came through only thanks to the support, eternal patience and grace of our editor Katy (you deserve a shout-out, and a crate of best beer!). But you see, every time I opened the book, it was like a punch in the gut. A punch by someone I knew, a family member.

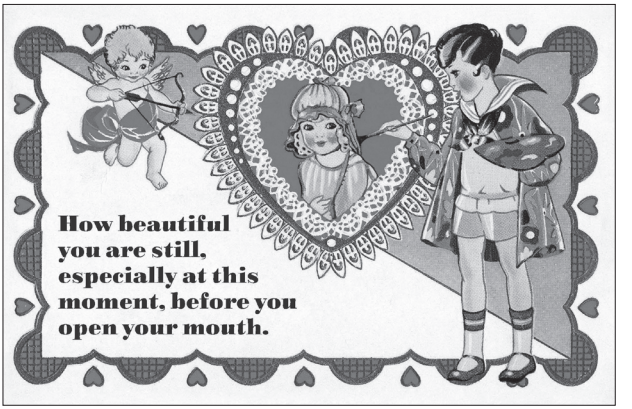
I would translate a sentence (and Ivana's sentences, as you have witnessed, are living organisms—each twisting across the page, demanding you harness it, and have it lead you)—and then I would need a break. Sometimes those breaks between sentences lasted for weeks. Going back to the text was like climbing back into the ring with the most intimidating of fighters. (Think *Karate Kid* meeting Ivan Drago of *Rocky* IV, if that means anything to you.)

To be sure, a translator needn't have experienced or lived through any of the events; the political, social, class or cultural context presented in the book in order to do a good job—in fact, I'm sure that having all those under your belt can often be an obstacle, feeling the text so close to home, wrecked and ruined, so close that you truly believe that no word in a foreign language can absorb the vast world it is supposed to carry, and birth anew. And this world, you may fear, is just too much, just as it is to live it—it's too much to take for a language that has no word for tamburitza, the instrument embodying the tradition and the deepest darkness of our own version of patriarchal conservatism: How do you translate this sound? Into a language that does not know pelinkovac, a cheap drink that goes a long way if you want to black out, yet stay on the 'arty' side of the night. (Something like absinthe, but not quite). This not-quiteness is something you have to contend with, as a translator, and make peace with, eventually. Befriend, even. Trust that the reader, across the linguistic ocean, doesn't need to have been slapped to feel the sting of the palm across their face, doesn't need to have scars to prove that they too bleed. After all, their own language, ultimately, is also but a poor stand-in for what, outside of all languages, we all get to experience in the lifelong Olympics of Feelings.

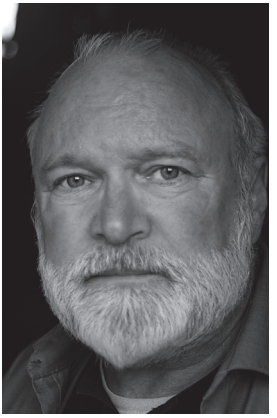
Funny, when I first read *Love Novel*, just as it was published in Croatian—I read it in a single breath, its avalanche of images and emotions carrying me to the final full stop so smoothly that I barely noticed any words. Funny, I say, because once I started actually looking at the words, as a translator, this whole new world opened

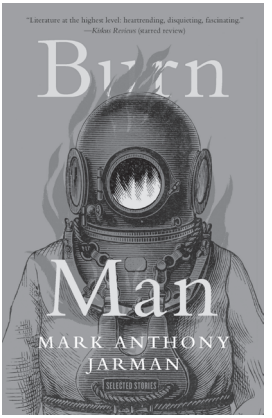
up; the incredible network of signals, circular references, compulsive thoughts buried in text to be excavated; the incredible force of the rhythm, carefully curated verbs and nouns, and—my favourite of all Ivana's writerly manoeuvres—her fervent yet seamless switching of tenses, perfectly reflecting patterns of anxious and distressed thought, throwing us back and forth in time, obsessively. It was only when I was given the charge of mediating this book into another language that I was struck by its intricacies, its complexity, and reminded that the art of great writing is to make all the effort invisible. Ivana Sajko has done just that, and I believe—after many rounds in the ring with *Love Novel*—that this translation has done it justice and we have all come out as winners, clutching at our paper medals, right here on this podium of words.

HAPPY VALENTINE'S DAY FROM BIBLIOASIS!



What better way to celebrate the February 6, 2024 release of *Love Novel*, Ivana Sajko's cutting and claustrophobic portrait of a marriage on the edge, than with vintage Valentines featuring quotations from the book? They're available at select independent bookstores—and we just might send you a few, with love, if you place an order on our website!





L: *Mark Anthony Jarman;* R: *cover design by Michel Vrana.*

MARK ANTHONY JARMAN is the author of *Touch Anywhere to Begin*, *Czech Techno*, *Knife Party at the Hotel Europa*, *My White Planet*, *19 Knives*, *New Orleans Is Sinking*, *Dancing Nightly in the Tavern*, and the travel book *Ireland's Eye*. His novel, *Salvage King Ya!*, is on Amazon.ca's list of 50 Essential Canadian Books and is the number one book on Amazon's list of best hockey fiction. Widely published in both Canada and the US, Jarman is a graduate of The Iowa Writers' Workshop, a Yaddo fellow, has taught at the University of Victoria, the Banff Centre for the Arts, and the University of New Brunswick, where he is fiction editor of *The Fiddlehead* literary journal.

ROD MOODY-CORBETT: *Let's take it from the top. How does a typical Mark Anthony Jarman story evolve?*

MARK ANTHONY JARMAN: Each story evolves differently, but they all start with fragments, an image, a scene. My drafts are very rough and that works for me. I don't know where the story might go. I was on a panel with Alistair MacLeod, who I adore, but he said he knows exactly where his are going and he was too cheap a Scot to write not knowing the end. I am happy to not always know.

I use newspaper clippings a lot. I was in Ireland and saw an article about a hit-and-run driver, a female who hit a boy, so I had a central scene and a character. I was interested in her side vs. the

media outcry. I changed the setting from Cork to Clontarf, a posh Dublin suburb where we were staying, and added other bits that I knew or learned on the trip. My friend Leon Litvack is a Dickens scholar in Belfast and I added him. My cousin is a detective in Dublin and I added him. I have watched Dublin change because of the EU and the Celtic Tiger boom and car culture (not for the better) and I used that. I was eavesdropping on the train from Sligo, got a good hospital scene about a woman's Da, and added that. I spoke to two men from Cork in Florence and added their ideas about Ireland being changed, "invaded."

Bono was promoting a tiresome new book in Dublin, so I thought I'll slag Bono because his stupid book gets more PR than all my books combined.

That Irish story, "That Petrol Emotion," will appear in *The Malahat Review*. I still get a kick out of placing a story in a mag, though Bono won't notice.

As an undergrad at UVic I asked my workshop if they could see the stitches in my story and they said no, so that was freeing. I like pastiche. The Smiths song "How Soon Is Now" has a murky twitchy video and I like those qualities. I had a good friend, Patrick, in Iowa City, who rented me a room in his old house for $50 a month (find that now). I would ask him whether a scene should go this way or that way, then he got mad when he saw I was doing the opposite of what he suggested. At the time I didn't want the expected words or transitions.

I really like adding new bits to a story as I go, enjoy the "where" moment, better to add it here or better there. It's a gut feeling.

I depend completely on rough notes and cheap notebooks. UNB exam booklets are perfect for travel.

I keep a notebook open when I watch TV; you never know what you might see or hear or use years later. The collecting pays off. I wrote down graffiti on a bridge for a story about a skateboarder who drowned.

I like to print out a draft and mark it up by hand. I avoid the screen when possible. I do a lot of editing and writing at brewpubs; they are my office, I bike there for exercise, get good beer, get work done, and I get more material. I don't want to condone drinking, but I get a lot of fodder, especially dialogue.

Stories take time and can be work, but also a lot of enjoyment. Flannery O'Connor used to laugh at her own writing, and I like that idea.

Sometimes I feel it wrecks it all to talk of process, like sausage making, better a mystery.

RMC: *Of all the stories collected in* Burn Man, *"Bear on a Chain," which you mention above, seems the most explicitly curatorial. Graffiti scrawls, lyrics, distress signals, news clippings, capsule histories and reminiscences worm their way in and out of the narrative like the montages in John Dos Passos's* USA Trilogy. *The story won the Maclean-Hunter Prize in* PRISM International's *Nonfiction Contest and a Gold National Magazine Award. Do these categorical distinctions, between fiction and nonfiction, essay and story, matter to you?*

MAJ: I think you know the answer to this one: those distinctions aren't very important to me. The last few years I've been writing more and more CNF, but I grew up in the fiction jungle and like to lean on the C word, the creative part of CNF. Writing any scene makes it a form of fiction, what's chosen, what's left out. I often use the example of a postcard: "Having a wonderful time. Wish you were here." Both of those statements might be fake news.

My travel piece, "Drunkards I Molest You!" (from my book *Touch Anywhere to Begin*) is set in Venice when Covid hit in February 2020. We were living there, the story is all true, but some scenes are out of order, minor characters are combined, four bars might become two bars, dialogue is tinkered with, and the end is not the chronological end, but it's a scene that felt like an end to me. Also, that scene with the nuns had laughter, which I thought might be wise when writing in the moment of a new unknown epidemic. I was wary of being too tragic, the way many were after September 11 (remember the alleged death of irony?). It's not science, it's gut feelings: Put this scene here? Or try it there? I get a kick out of that.

I'm glad you mention Dos Passos; he seems forgotten. I stole his trilogy *USA* from our library at Archbishop MacDonald High School and he was a big early influence on me, exactly for that mix of headlines, biographies, illustrations, wars, stream of consciousness vignettes, labour and class conflicts, money, and recurring characters involved in numerous story lines. The influence is there

in "Bear on a Chain" about the skateboarder drowning, and also very much in my story "Assiniboia Death Trip," where I mix fiction and history, mix 1800s hat fashions and newspaper ads from the same era as the deaths of Louis Riel, Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, Custer, Wild Bill Hickok, etc. And it's a love story. I don't usually read my own stories, but if I go back to visit "Assiniboia Death Trip," it seems to change every time I look, a life of its own. Not sure why.

RMC: *"Assiniboia Death Trip" was the first story of yours I read, and remains a favourite. I still have a copy of the* subTerrain *issue in which it appeared. How do magazines and literary journals figure in your creative process?*

MAJ: I'm going to be sickeningly positive on this question. Lit mags are pointless, but I love that they exist. I was teaching as an underpaid sessional at UVic in the 90s and a poet said why bother with lit mags, no one reads them. And it's true. But in the department I had access to free postage (an age of snail mail) and a photocopier and I papered the universe with submissions to agents, presses and lit mags. I wanted to get into *Snake Nation Review* just because of the name. I've published in the *Barcelona Review*, *Hong Kong Review*, and *Bombay Review* for the same reasons; I like maps and I like the distant names on my CV. I don't worry about getting editing, I like mags more as a destination, a flagpole out there in the world. The editors help a writer not by editing, but by being there, to read and consider what a writer is trying to do.

And a mag your parents or friends have never heard of might end up helping you. A story in *Prairie Fire* led to an anthology and led eventually to book contracts. Mags can lead to *Best Canadian Stories*, the Journey Prize, the Pushcart Prize, and National Magazine Awards. Books and publications led to a very rewarding job teaching CW with better pay than a sessional. None of it was planned at all, I just wanted to write, but all the small steps helped. Rejections are not pleasant, but I think you have to send and hope you find the right editor, the right brain. I've always like having stuff out in the mail as a future possibility.

For a time the *Malahat* said no, but a young crowd at PRISM said yes over and over. If you run into gatekeepers, go elsewhere. I tried every mag in Canada. Later the *Malahat* published me, but at the

BOOKSELLER BUZZ

"Harrowing. [*Burn Man*] will burrow under your psychic skin and pester your mind with thoughts and meditations. All that is to say this is a grand collection of stories that will fit into your busy schedule yet keep the pages turning. This book is amazing! I urge you to sample just one tale. May I gently suggest you start with 'Cowboys Incorporated?' You'll be hooked?"

Linda Bond, Auntie's Bookstore (Spokane, WA)

"A compendium of the complexities of the male experience—men behaving badly, men trying to do the right thing despite the odds stacked against them, men grieving, working, fighting, being jerks, being saints … Jarman's sentences are marvels of architectural structure, built from the grit that builds up in each of these troubled souls. Deftly-placed song lyrics and literary quotes pepper the prose, making you want to read each sentence again and again, savoring the words on your tongue. A swaggering, abrasively poetic collection."

Grace Harper, Mac's Backs Books (Cleveland Heights, OH)

time I had to adapt, decided to try NL, NB, the US. I had a long driveway and I enjoyed the walk to the mailbox to see if I had any replies.

When starting out, I received rejection notes from *The Fiddlehead*: "Am I missing something?" "Is this even a story?" I learned to NOT write notes like that when wearing my editor's hat decades later at the same mag.

It was a great pleasure to work with the late Joan Harcourt at *Queen's Quarterly*, though we never met in person. Joan was fast to respond, she took many pieces over the years, and *Queen's Quarterly* also used my own photos with my travel pieces, which was gravy. I'm not sure anyone ever sees those issues, but I'm addicted.

I first saw *subTerrain* during a magazine strike; the magazine store in Victoria brought in mags they didn't usually have and I liked the look of *subTerrain*. I sent a piece and that led to a long relationship

with the mag and with Anvil Press that continues to this moment. I have often joked that I could have made more money with a paper route than through lit mags, but it has been more rewarding than tossing papers on a porch. Similar action, now that I think of it. And perhaps foolishly, I am launching a brand new magazine, *Camel*, co-edited with Clarissa Hurley. My pal Jason in Slovenia said to the news, "Are you fucking crazy? I mean congratulations."

RMC: *The first sentence that the lucky reader will encounter in* Burn Man *spans 120 words.*

"[S]lept," "leaked," "blew," "split," "met," "sprang," "waking," "staring," "trotting," "living," "gathering," "glittering," "brimming." In what seems like a love letter to the title essay of Douglas Glover's Attack of the Copula Spiders, *the verb "to be" does not occur once. A lesser writer might've opted for "moving" or "shuffling" instead of "trotting," but your verb, with its suggestion of equinity, gives us image, metaphor, and sound—trotting carries and propels (reignites?) the sentence's many "t's" and "t" sounds (leaked) begun in the very first clause. So. My question: How might you characterize your own relationship to language? Are you still having fun?*

MAJ: Short answer, yes, big fun with language, though I think *Touch Anywhere* is a bit more accessible than my usual stuff, less driven by language, less esoteric. People in my apartment building, not big readers, really like the stories, find the book funny, so I'm glad for that lack of a barrier. But usually I feel language is everything; a few words make a huge difference, and it doesn't have to be fireworks all the time. In a new story I had waves "moving" over sandbars; I changed it to waves "moving themselves" over sandbars. Tiny addition, one word a reader won't notice, but I hope it makes it more active. I try to look at every word, every sentence, and I'm surprised when other writers don't seem to care. Below, same new story, I like the words about herons, "majestic and goofy":

> When Bruno and I sailed like pirates down in Puget Sound, we spotted any number of herons. Across this great continent, great blue herons are making a comeback. Eagles too, Orcas, all good signs. If the birds migrate here to a colony at Frog Lake, are they settlers? Do herons study the faces in their group, do they make eyes?

Do herons compare bodies, cheekbones, giant wingspans? And next spring, in sparks and glances, who might be their new partner? In the shallows a trio of blue herons perch on stick legs, majestic and goofy, pondering our eternal questions like the gravest of ballerinas.

As mentioned, I really enjoy smashing bits together, adding and adding and adding as I run into images or ideas during the day or when going to sleep. I keep going back to a passage, I worry it. This below started as one simple sentence, driving a country road, but became longer:

From the hotel Emma drives the truck back to the farm. Bruno doesn't have a licence, drunk driving again, doesn't learn. Emma roars down the Correction Line, faster than the speed of gossip, gravel pounding beneath like someone knocking. We pass the trestle bridge, pass the burnt farmhouse where Vern Fedoruk's pigs got inside, knocked over a big TV, and the wall caught fire. Pigs are smart, bored. I painted Fred's barn on high ladders and pigs rubbed their flanks on the ladders, me wobbling away up there as if on a mast. Fred gave me his fringed buckskin jacket after the job. The road is lit well, but it's black behind us, we are devouring the lit road, Bruno's V-8 dining on high octane gasoline. If the road vanishes, no one can follow.

The pigs starting a fire is true, from a newspaper clipping about Croatia. Newspapers are so great, and they are almost gone. I'm glad I was around for them; they gave me so much material.

And yes, I think about sounds, choose words for their sounds. When I started writing I didn't really hear the words; now I think a lot about sounds and rhythm. I want it to flow, to have echoes. Vern was a childhood friend and the name seemed to fit the scene; hi Vern!

RMC: *A delighted itinerancy marks so many of these stories. "I am a fast form flitting under cool underpasses and gliding finely engineered shoulders and curves," the narrator of "Flat Out Earth Moving" confides. How does movement operate in your conception of a story? Do you consider yourself a chronicler of the road?*

MAJ: Yes, movement is a good word. I use an Eliot line at the start of "Cowboys Incorporated," "Desire itself is movement not in itself desirable," and my teacher at Iowa, Bharati Mukherjee, felt the double-edged quality of the line made clearer to her what I was trying to do in the story. I did a lot of moving around in those days, Edmonton, West Coast, Iowa, Yaddo in upstate New York, met a lot of people, and I wanted to use that material. In 1973, right after high school, my friend Bill and I drove a pickup truck to Southern California. We thought we'd sleep on the beach under palm trees and hang out with Joni Mitchell and Neil Young, but LA was horrible. I preferred Northern California. Many summers we'd thumb from Edmonton to BC to pick fruit and try to get all the way to Long Beach. In 1980, I thumbed in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland; I wanted to see Newfoundland before oil money ruined it the way oil had altered Edmonton. The Beat writers were an influence on this travel; certainly not the nicest people, especially Neal Cassidy, but as a callow youth I admired the energy on the page. Punk music and New Wave was a similar influence. Decades later I taught *On the Road* in my road course at UNB and I couldn't believe how melancholy it seemed. Very different than my impression as a teen. I envy that world a little: pre-malls, pre-franchises, pre-interstate highway, pre-internet, pre-corporate control. The Beats are associated with the 1950s and 60s, but *On the Road* is a love letter to the 1940s, a world that was vanishing when the book was finally published.

My stories "Righteous Speedboat" and "The Scout's Lament" are fairly static, set in bars, but both stories hinge on possible travel and change, so there is stasis and movement both. My more recent travel pieces, say in Trogir or Venice or Shanghai, use the same mix. In every destination I have to find a Clean Well-Lighted Place to work, a refuge to hide and collect my thoughts about a place.

It's a bit of a cliché that travel lends itself to writing, that we see things with a different eye than at home, but I agree, and feel disruptions are good for a writer. The poet Karen Solie once told me, "Things happen to you." I'm not sure if this is good or bad in terms of my life, but writing can benefit: for example, at the exact right time, seeing the drunken widower necking with a statue of Mary. The young thief beat up right below our open windows in Marseille. Chatting with four Afghan refugees in Arles, then see-

ing them nabbed by police outside our train. A blind man walking in heavy traffic in Mumbai. Our deranged neighbour in Florence who tried to break into our apartment and our lives at 4am, shouting Apri, Apri! In Venice right when Covid hits.

In 1984, I went from Yaddo (Saratoga Springs, NY) to Philly to visit relatives, then I rode a Greyhound for three days to Seattle; after a day or two I really wanted to get off, and John Cheever's stories kept

The poet Karen Solie once told me, "Things happen to you." I'm not sure if this is good or bad in terms of my life, but writing can benefit.

me sane. Cheever's suburban work was a useful contrast for me versus Bukowski or Celine or Kerouac's road stories. And speaking of suburbs (note the amazing transition) I drove a truck for CN, would do my route really fast, then park this giant orange beast in front of my parents' house and hang out. It was great to be out of the dim warehouse on my own; in those days there were no tracking devices on a delivery vehicle. I had finished my BA at UVic, so cynically hung the seemingly useless degree in my truck. But it turned out to be a good degree, leading to Iowa and teaching gigs. That railroad job was great for saving money to travel more or to go back to school and it made me pro-union: everyone should have a decent living wage. I recently found a small journal from 1975, and it details my very first airplane flight, Edmonton to Montreal; I really enjoyed the rush of taking off that first time and it led to almost fifty years of travel since that plane. I also want to mention my friend Levi Dronyk, a good writer in Victoria who died too young. I was always a bit cautious, say passing by a bar that seemed a bit rough. Levi was more adventurous, would say, "Let's go in and see." And it would be good. So I have tried to keep a bit of Levi in me that way when I travel, to open doors and look in. Because it is easier to play it safe. I sent you that neon sign from Italy: *Bad Decisions Make Good Stories.* Some truth to that. Staying on in Venice when Covid hit might seem a bad decision, but it did lead to a good story, and we had Venice to ourselves. I'm not sure I want to go back to the crowds after that time; we were really spoiled. But February I'm going to Florence for a stay, so I'll drop by Venice for a look and hope for the best.

A BIBLIOASIS Q&A WITH CINCINNATI'S GREGORY KORNBLUH, OWNER OF DOWNBOUND BOOKS

Downbound Books, 4139 Apple St, Cincinnati, OH 45223.

BIBLIOASIS: *Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and Downbound Books—its origin, and also your dreams for it.*

GREGORY KORNBLUH: I grew up in Cincinnati, spent about fifteen years in New England—including a stint working for Mary Cotton at Newtonville Books and then a decade at Harvard University Press—and then came back home in late 2018. Like a lot of people in the book business, I'd long been shaping a shop in my mind, and finally decided to give it a go; I signed a lease in June 2019, spent some long months building out, and opened in late October. I'd always envisioned it as a smallish space with a clear point of view and readily apparent political commitments, but where any open-minded visitor could feel welcome, and like to think that's pretty much what we've got here.

B: *Based just across the river from Detroit, we have a special fondness for midwest bookshops. Ohio is home to many of our favourite bookstores—from Downbound to Prologue to Mac's Backs. I'd love to hear you talk*

about Cincinnati's literary culture, and your thoughts on Ohio's larger independent bookstore scene.

GK: A bunch of us came together to arrange Cincinnati's first bookstore crawl this past October, and seven of the twelve participating shops had opened just within the past five years. So it's boom times here, for sure. The University of Cincinnati has really strong PhD programs in fiction and poetry, and their faculty and especially their students give a real energy to the local scene, as do writers based at Xavier and Miami Universities. We also have a significant Appalachian diaspora here that's fostered a thriving web of writers.

As far as bookselling in Ohio more broadly, I think definitely we benefit from the relative affordability here, right? A bookshop in Ohio won't need to sell nearly as many books to pay its rent as a shop on the coast. There are ways in which that could encourage a sleepiness—necessity/invention/etc—but I think generally it makes room for taking chances. We also can't really rely on big-name events driving traffic our way, and so we see a lot of creativity around programming, something that's maybe best exemplified by our friends and heroes up the road in Columbus at Two Dollar Radio Headquarters.

B: *I know you come to bookselling from the publishing industry. Biblioasis (Press) grew out of a bookstore. Can you tell me a bit about how your experience in publishing informs your work as a bookseller?*

GK: Oh, in all sorts of ways! Having worked in publicity, having worked in sales, those experiences give me a much better sense of what publishers and their staff care about than I'd otherwise have, which I think helps Downbound to build relationships that are more collaborative and mutually beneficial than just a vendor/purchaser arrangement. Having been at a university press meant I came in with a good sense of what's out there beyond the Big Five, and so indies and scholarly presses have been a critical part of what we do from the beginning.

More practically, having spent so long amongst publishing people trying to meet the needs of booksellers helped me to think differently about some of the needs that weren't always so easily met. For

example, the press would sometimes be bringing out some interesting book that didn't fit a standard category—maybe a hybrid of sorts, maybe an oddball, occasionally truly sui generis—and our sales reps would remind us that not having an obvious section in which to shelve something presented a challenge to booksellers. But book people know that those uncategorizable books are often the most compelling! So there are these inherited ways of doing things that could take what should be a strength and turn it into a weakness. Our sections at Downbound are designed to avoid that problem.

B: *What's one thing you hope all Downbound customers walk away with (aside from a good book)?*

GK: One thing? Phew! I guess I'd want for folks to leave with a new —or bolstered—sense that we don't all have to read the same shit. Chasing bestsellers? Cool, some of them are fantastic. Got eyes only for the latest BookTok smash? Great, enjoy it. But there's more.

B: *Best non-bookstore stop for a book lover in Cincinnati?*

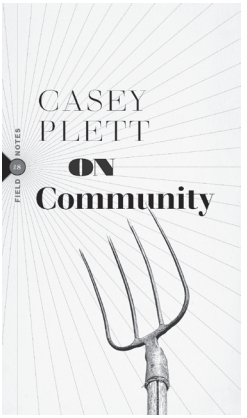
GK: The Mercantile Library is a true gem. The best literary programming in the city, in a gorgeous space with a long history and a longer future: they've got a famously silly 10,000 year lease, and are even a stop on the last book tour on Earth in Emily St. John Mandel's *Sea of Tranquility*. Sadly, the Library's home is currently closed for renovations—they're expanding to an additional floor—so you'll all have to come back. In the meantime…we could camp out in Emily Henry's yard?

B: *Lastly, always, what are you reading now?*

GK: Jennifer Croft's *The Extinction of Irena Rey*, the new Tommy Orange, and I finally got a finished copy of my brilliant older sister Anna Kornbluh's *Immediacy: Or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism* (out from Verso in late January) and so I'm spending some time with that one again, too.

from ON COMMUNITY

by Casey Plett



L: *Casey Plett;* R: *series design by Ingrid Paulson.*

HUMANS NEED COMMUNITY. EVERY piece of our knowledge tells us this. Isolation and loneliness are deadly, like *actually* deadly. It's hard to quantify such experiences, but researchers taking stabs posit that social isolation drags down a person's mortality as much as alcoholism or smoking do. "A 32% increased risk of stroke," particularly in people above fifty, says the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the US. A Harvard study from the first year of COVID dispassionately reports, "Early mortality … depression, anxiety, heart disease, substance abuse, and domestic abuse"—these are, they say, "the potentially steep costs of loneliness."

Heart disease? Stroke? A risk that rivals smoking and boozing?! As it turns out. Being alone is bad for you—and it's not all about close family and friends. "Talking to strangers," says Robert Waldinger, who leads the longest-running study on human happiness, at Harvard, "actually makes us happier. There's good research on this." (It's true, there's lots.) Even in the initial terrifying days of the pandemic, where few were counselling against physical distancing, the US National Institutes of Health warned of drastic health consequences in the elderly, brought on by "an acute, severe sense of social isolation and loneliness." And on the other side of generations, the same for young people, among whom anxiety and depression in 2020 was at nearly twice the levels of

the general population. In *All about Love*, bell hooks wrote that we make communities "to ensure human survival everywhere in the world … communities sustain life—not nuclear families, or the 'couple,' and certainly not the rugged individualist … even individuals who are raised in nuclear families usually experience it as merely a small unit within a larger unit of extended kin." And in

My argument is that community is a vital but oft-neglected sibling of those rarefied entities that keep one away from isolation and despair.

that article on that Harvard research above, the one dispassionately reporting early mortality and heart disease? The deck for that article begins so simply, almost AI-like in its awkward irrefutability: "Robust social network is key to easing pain."

One might say: Okay, sure, loneliness is bad, duh. But is community really the skeleton key to solving it? My argument is not that community alone can nullify these ills. My argument is that community is a vital but oft-neglected sibling of those rarefied entities that keep one away from isolation and despair; it rests right up there with cherished friends, a partner who loves you, a family of some stripe who love you back, a passion or commitment that gives you juice through the days. Few of us enjoy all those things in this life (I currently don't). But some combo of them makes existence worth living (as it does mine). I want to argue for community's import alongside them.

I think that even the most private and introverted among us still benefit deeply from community connections; almost everyone knows what it's like to enter a space with other humans and feel warmth. And, in kind, know that warmth's absence. When I told my father I was writing this essay on community, he responded, "That's something I never got. I never found my tribe." There's an epic Lana del Rey video where, during the outro, she says: "Every night I used to pray that I'd find my people." Everyone has their own instant idea of what these statements mean.

OKAY, AND LOOK, SOMETIMES all this is small. Sometimes these communal connections occur in traces, happenstance, serendipity. Sometimes it doesn't take work. (Activity isn't always labour.)

Digital spaces are often derided as leading to the breakdown of society, but they, too, are conveyors of community. You can be alone in a room with no wish or ability to physically interact with other humans but still be someone who dips an electronic toe in the river of others. Even if you're just lurking and not participating. "You can almost feel normal," says a ghostly character in Emily Zhou's *Girlfriends*, about silently watching posts go by online. "Like you're a member of some chorus, no matter what's going on with you." It can mean something. Sometimes it means ugly things, of course. But I'm not always sure we recognize the nourishing parts of these digital spaces. And truly, I think that's been the case for a long time.

There's an old comic strip that's always stuck with me. It's from *Bloom County*. 1988. In the first panel, two characters, Opus and Hodge-Podge, are talking in front of a television. Opus is flipping through channels, the remote control going *bink bink bink*. Opus says, "Cable TV."

In the second panel, he continues, "Ya know, in years past, one could watch Jack Benny at 8 p.m. every Saturday night and know you're sharing the same moment with nearly every other American."

In the third panel, there's no dialogue, just Opus pressing the remote. *Bink bink bink bink bink*.

The last panel finds Opus stumbling onto soft-core porn. (Hodge-Podge says, "S'pose we're sharing this with Carol Burnett?")

It's those initial nostalgic comments I've always remembered—"one could watch Jack Benny at 8 p.m. every Saturday night and know you're sharing the same moment with nearly every other American"—along with the image of Opus—a wistful, sensitive protagonist—wordlessly pressing the remote control. *Bink bink bink bink bink*. It's that underlying idea: that he used to watch the same show with the rest of the country on Saturdays at eight o'clock, and he got a tiny need met in doing so, but that's all gone now. In the strip, the setting is spare and darkly lit, as *Bloom County* often was when it went indoors. The television is outsized and looming in each frame, a reflection of the lonely, detached, then-modern world of the 1980s that its creator Berkeley Breathed clearly saw.

Today, in the 2020s, I think this strip tells us two stories. First, that indirectly connecting with others via mass media is not a unique invention of the digital age. And, second, that mourning

the fraying of those connections, to regard the ongoing losses and shifts of mass media as *inherently isolating*—that's also an old story, with its own cycles of worry with each new development.

Now: I'm sympathetic to the position that the harms of social media are grim and real, in ways we probably don't yet quite understand. But I'm skeptical of easy culprits, and I'm skeptical of the oft-repeated idea that today's digital world is marching us into an

I'm skeptical of easy culprits, and I'm skeptical of the oft-repeated idea that today's digital world is marching us into an isolated doom.

isolated doom. (Further, some closer analysis suggests that, at least before the pandemic, loneliness was not a problem getting steadily worse or better.) Social media, smartphones, desktop computers, Walkmans, cable TV, that very same broadcast era with three channels that Opus pines for—they were all blamed at one point as corrosive to the community bonds of the time. A Toni Morrison character in *Sula*—a novel spanning from the 1910s to the 1960s—laments the invention of the telephone and that new broadcast era of television, because it meant fewer people stopping by the house.

In reference to the strong social ties of nineteenth-century, pre-urban America—those of the barn-raising and midwifing rural variety—Robert Putnam wrote in *Bowling Alone*: "Some early sociologists thought that this thicket of informal social connection would not survive a transplant into the anonymous city, that urbanization would doom both friendship and extended kinship. However, experience showed that even in the most densely populated urban settings, social filaments linking residents were steadily regenerated." (A funny quote in itself, as much of Putnam's book conversely exudes more doomerist Opus-like hand-wringing.)

The concern about loss brought by progress is a continuing story, and I would suggest that, in a Janus-like fashion, that concern is usually both relevant and exaggerated. Like: sure, it's complex, but are we maybe not always losing and gaining here? Because community can be fractured and slippery and seemingly ever at risk of dissolution at the same time that it can consistently regroup and resolder itself, mutate in ever-new fashions, form a balm to meet needs in ways it is difficult to predict or imagine.

I don't want to oversell this too much, particularly with social media—again, I don't think we quite understand what that's doing to us yet. Social trust is low in the United States. There's evidence that the potential for political organizing on social media, particularly Twitter, has had stultifying effects. Even if loneliness is not a progressively worsening problem, it's still an enormous ill no individual anecdote can paper over.

And yet: for all the vats of ink spilled on these issues, I wonder if there aren't also seams of growing light we miss, steady heartbeats of communal well-being that still function. They deserve a bit of ink too.

To shift away from media of any variety: when I lived full time in Windsor, I went through a breakup that took several years. Those weren't bad years, but it sometimes sucked, and I was often deeply sad, and I spent a lot of time in bars. I didn't really make friends in those bars. But I was enough of a regular in a few places that I soon consistently felt welcome and watched over, and to this day, there are a handful of establishments where I will walk in and see a person I recognize and they will wave their hand and say, "How's it going, Casey?"

I never got any of these folks' contacts, and they never got mine. In retrospect, this suited me perfectly. They weren't strangers, but they weren't exactly friends. Often the word acquaintances is used to describe that kind of relationship, but they didn't feel like acquaintances: they felt like community. I think, too, of my grandfather, the one who lived most of his life in his tiny hometown, and even though his later years were spent outside the church, and even though he withdrew from much of town life toward the end, he would still mention to me how, like, the guy who fixed his car said he didn't have to pay right away, he could pay later, and my grandfather would say, "I just thought that was really special," in a manner that clearly went beyond money. And I believe he was getting a small need met, in the way his sad, gay, heartbroken granddaughter was getting a small need met entering dark bars to familiar faces a thousand miles away.

ADVANCE BOOKSELLER PRAISE FOR

A MARCH 2024 INDIE NEXT PICK

"*Your Absence Is Darkness* explores the idea that the world is measured, ordered and ultimately blown to pieces by love, that there are two kinds of transcendent love, one stolid, 'boring' and enduring as a fence post. The other passionate and destructive to everything around it. The world gets caught in the middle of these two loves and is alternately upheld and upset. This is the search for 'true' happiness that all mortals face. Our enigmatic narrator, possessed of the ability to write outside of time, is tasked with recounting the stories of several passionate love affairs in a rural community in Iceland. I haven't underlined this many sentences in years … Stefánsson is obsessed with music and weaves in snatches from his favourite songs but his writing is so evocative that I can't help but visualize things … I was sold when 'The Devil' showed up in an MF DOOM t-shirt."

Douglas Riggs, Bank Square Books (Mystic, CT)

"Inherited memories, legacies imprinted upon generations of Icelanders, determine how characters accommodate the processes of living and dying in this unforgettable, brilliant novel … It is difficult to imagine how there could be a book published in 2024 that I will love more."

Lori Feathers, Interabang Books (Dallas, TX)

Your Absence Is Darkness *by Jón Kalman Stefánsson*
Translated from the Icelandic by Philip Roughton
March 5, 2024

Jón Kalman Stefánsson

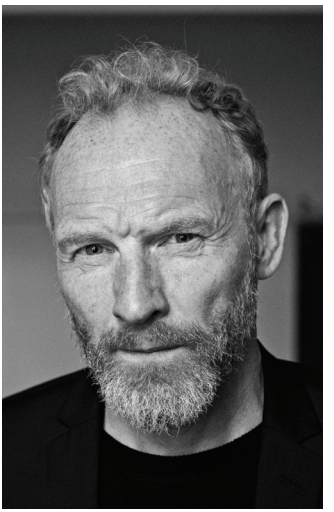
TRANSLATED FROM THE ICELANDIC BY PHILIP ROUGHTON

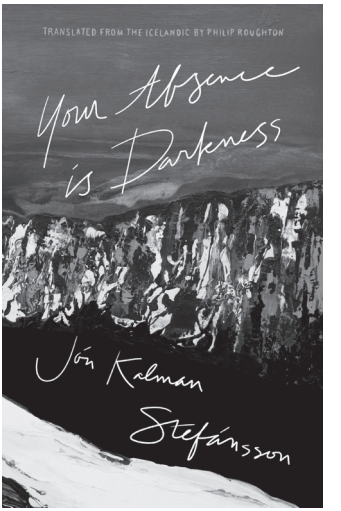
"A wondrous and haunting tale of lost memory and self. Ultimately the questions around what make us human—is it our personal memories (when they are always so different from other people's) or is it the larger mythologies that we share as a people? Deeply moving and harrowing."

Jesse Hassinger, Odyssey Bookshop (South Hadley, MA)

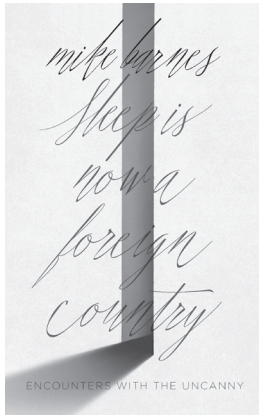
"This isn't so much a novel as it is a vision quest for meaning against the endless tides of fate. A journey to the core of love and death, and of life itself. It wrecked me; it turned me into a poet and a poem. It made me want to sing while I still can. Anyone bold enough to revel in Death's Playlist will be well rewarded even as they are left in ruins."

Mira Akbar, Dudley's Bookshop Cafe (Bend, OR)





A MIKE BARNES PLAYLIST



L: *Mike Barnes;* R: *cover design by Ingrid Paulson.*

I DON'T RECALL WHAT music I might have been listening to while writing this book, which was first drafted fourteen years ago, and only one song is mentioned in it: "Spanish Bombs" by The Clash. So I need to come up with another way to pick tracks for a playlist. There might be many such ways. I have chosen to make two mini-playlists based on the book's structure.

Sleep Is Now a Foreign Country (subtitled *Encounters with the Uncanny*) tells its story in two interweaving timelines.

In the first, spanning 1963–1977, a young person undergoes a kind of initiation into the uncanny. During his formative years (ages 8–22), a boy (a version of myself) is increasingly drawn to uncanny states and events. This part of the narration is like a dark fairy tale, in which a naïve protagonist is lured deeper and deeper into a dark forest where something sinister awaits. When it is finally encountered in its full powers, the result is predictably devastating.

But that is not the whole story. In the present timeline, thirty years later, the narrator again copes with the influx of the uncanny (as has clearly happened many times), using tools and techniques gained through long experience. The coping isn't easy, or entirely successful—but it enables a very different relationship with what, to a younger self, was simply overwhelming.

The uncanny is now a door through which healing as well as harm can pass.

That can inform a life as well as deform it.

That is not just destructive, but constructive—as the small tangible artifact of the book in hand attests.

MINI-PLAYLIST 1 (PAST AS DREAM)

Growing up, and then living in rented rooms in my teens and twenties, I did not own a record player. But there was always a radio, at first just a small transistor, usually perched in the corner of the kitchen counter. The station playlists were amazingly eclectic—with older artists like Nat King Cole sitting easily beside early rock and novelty songs and Brill Building tunes. As time went on, the audio spigot narrowed into thinner streams, or niches, without much overlap.

My first three songs are chosen for the years in which they were playing on the radio, years which brought significant change to my narrator.

"It's My Party" (1963), sung by Lesley Gore. Written by Gluck, Gold, and Weiner; produced by Quincy Jones. I've always been a sucker for catchy pop melodies; one listen to this song and the tune is in your head forever. I love the twist of paradox it puts on teen heartache, with the birthday girl insisting on her right to cry at her own party. It jibes with my narrator's dawning sense that in a world exactly opposite to what it's said to be, the only appropriate responses might be reversals: *It's my party, and I'll cry if I want to.*

"Come and Get It" (1970), sung by Badfinger. Written by Paul McCartney in 1969 for the film *The Magic Christian*, with the Badfinger version released in North America early the next year. My narrator thinks of 1970 as the last year he felt like a normal, healthy, clean-cut kid—exactly the target audience for this MOR rocker—before sliding into an endangered sort of life ripe for trafficking with dark forces and entities. He has the sense, in retrospect, of a door quickly closing: *If you want it, here it is, come and get it / But you'd better hurry 'cause it's goin' fast.*

"Alison" (1977), written and sung by Elvis Costello. Something about this song has always sounded haunted to me. The spare and liquid

guitar, the clear and plaintive address. There is something sweetly broken about the melody. The song's sense of a doomed reunion fits the sense in *Sleep* of a woman once known in dream re-encountered under fantastic circumstances: *Oh, it's so funny to be seeing you after so long, girl.* I won't say more. The song bespeaks a trauma to which the only possible response is a repeated declaration of faith: *Alison, I know this world is killing you. / Oh, Alison, my aim is true. / My aim is true.*

MINI-PLAYLIST 2 (DREAM AS LUCID)

Some sorceries can't be ducked or beaten, or fought to better than a draw. But if you survive the first rounds, and are granted time enough, you can learn to parley with them, turning a nightmare that must be passively endured to something more like a lucid dream that can be shaped and shared. That could be a definition of all art.

"Here But I'm Gone (Part II)," written and sung by Curtis Mayfield. I don't know where Part I is, or if there is one, but it doesn't matter. The song's from 1999, but that doesn't matter either, because now I'm not bound by the radio's offerings and can get a song anytime. Nor is it keyed to a particular scene in the book, other than the narrator's sense, on the first page, of the realm of the uncanny tapping him again on the shoulder to say, Hello, it's your old friend, and it's time to come with me for a while, with all the eerie lost-ness and dark magic that will likely involve, evoked perfectly by Mayfield's space-thinned voice in the refrain: *If I took the time to replace / What my mind erased / I still feel as if I'm here, but I'm gone.* There's no lucid dreaming without first surrendering to the dream.

"dlp 2.2," from "Disintegration Loops" by William Basinski. This work has a legendary connection with the attacks of 9/11, since Basinski completed the four-album project on that morning and dedicated it to the victims. But I didn't know of that connection when I first heard it. How he created the work is legendary, too. Trying to transfer some of his early recordings to a digital format, Basinski found that the tapes were literally decaying, with increasing gaps and static. Instead of cursing his fate, he went with it, playing extended versions of the deterioration and even enhancing it with reverb effects. The results are haunting, medita-

tive, elegiacally beautiful. Listening to it, you enter another realm and understand loss from the shards and spaces within it. "dlp 2.2" is my favourite. It is a model for honouring fragments and letting them speak in their own fractured tongue.

Run Time: The three songs of the first playlist clock in at only a little over eight minutes. The two of the second run to over 38, with "dlp 2.2" being 32-plus minutes. The contrast is accidental, but it rings true. Re-processing something takes at least five times as long as living it.

BOOKSELLER BUZZ

"A slim, beautiful memoir . . . Barnes is especially good at detailing the way stations between sanity and wherever it is the mad go (past, or as he describes it, under the truth). Full of poetry and lovely turns of phrase such as the 'ghost routes' and 'parallel architecture' a young Barnes uses to traverse campus and encounter as few people as possible (back when he knew he was starting to unravel and feared what kind of person others saw him as). Beware of watch repairmen, y'all. Let those watches break."

Douglas Riggs, Bank Square Books (Mystic, CT)

"It feels like the recollection of a half remembered dream. Time and space fold together in beautifully evocative prose. One of those books where I feel like I'm getting a close glimpse into the inner workings of the author's brain, but find a vast alien landscape. How did we get here? Where is this going? I can't possibly know, but I'll treasure the privilege of being invited along for the ride."

Renee Sima, BookPeople (Austin, TX)

"Sparse, strange, and—of course—dreamy, this efficient little book is a vivid peek into a life shuffling and whorling with hallucinations. The author's self-awareness even at the time of hallucination is compelling and makes it all more real."

Piera Varela, Porter Square Books (Cambridge, MA)

WHAT THE CRITICS ARE SAYING

Ray Robertson's All the Years Combine: The Grateful Dead in Fifty Shows

"Robertson—writing at full, heart-exploding tilt—charts the course of the greatest American band (yes, I said it), from their humble start to their humbling end through capsule reviews of 50 shows. This is a glorious book, full of setlists and anecdotes and clear-eyed love."

Robert J Wiersema, Toronto Star

"Delightfully genre-fluid—part critique, part review, part biography, part journalism."

Ashwinin Gangal, Palo Alto Weekly

"Engaging and enjoyable front to back. And for the Grateful Dead live neophyte . . . the book provides a roadmap, a guide, a place to start and finish and explore the music while you read. And for these reasons, *All the Years Combine*, much like the music it heralds, transcends."

Frank Valish, Under the Radar

"As any Deadhead worth their weight in hemp and LSD will tell you, there's nothing like a Grateful Dead concert, and the author capably demonstrates the good, bad, and ugly elements that followed the band around for decades . . . Robertson is a fluid music writer."

Kirkus Reviews

"*All the Years Combine* is a fast, enlightening read but it is also something to savor, like one of the Dead's notorious hour-long jams."

Kevin Wierzbicki, Anti Music

"Impressively insightfully informative, exceptionally well organized and thoroughly 'reader friendly' in presentation . . . a 'must read' history for the legions of Grateful Dead fans."

Midwest Book Review

PORTRAIT OF A PUBLICIST

MADELEINE MAILLET is a writer, translator, and French Canadian. Her stories have been published here and there and anthologized in *The Journey Prize Stories* and *Best Canadian Stories.*

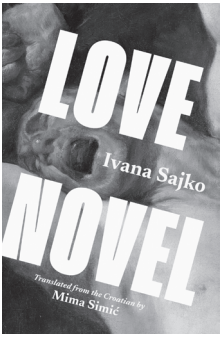
EMILY STEPHENSON-BOWES is a publishing assistant at Biblioasis.

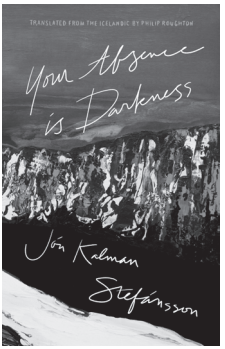
ESB: *Madeleine, unlike many Biblioasis employees, you grew up in Windsor! Tell us a bit about what you've been up to since leaving Windsor and why you decided to move home?*

MM: I lived in Toronto, Bruxelles, Montreal, Texas, and Chicago before moving back to Windsor. After living in a number of different big cities and working in advertising, publishing, and academia, I had the necessary distance to see my hometown fondly. For all its industrial grit, it's a place full of warm people who don't have time for bullshit, who are interested in anyone who makes anything, from books, to music, to cars, and the pizza can't be beat. Montreal pizza is pathetic. I also missed my family and wanted my daughter to have a chance to get to know them.

ESB: *I know that you're also a writer. Has working in publishing changed the way that you think about your own writing or the business of writing?*

MM: Respect your editor and their timelines because production is a process, not a miracle. If production is delayed, the publicity campaign will be knee-capped. With that in mind, try to handle edits with grace—your line editor and copyeditor are not being cavalier with their metaphorical red pen. Edits are given a lot of consideration and take a lot of time. Try to remember that in responding to them. The text spends so long in the author's hands that it starts to feel like a part of you. My daughter hates having her hair cut—*mine! mine!*—she cries as the dead hair falls to the floor. This is how some writers feel about edits. Try to remember that collaborating with an editor throughout the pre-production process is an important precursor to the loss of control over the text you will experience when your word document becomes a





Cover designs for Love Novel, Your Absence Is Darkness, *and* The Hollow Beast *all by Jason Arias.*

book on library shelves and in stores. At that point, readers all over the world will be deciding for themselves exactly what it means!

On the publicity front, make yourself available for publicity opportunities, think of some op-eds you would be interested in writing, and check email and voicemails (if your team is leaving you voicemails you should probably check your email more often, lol). Oh, and don't sell every short story in your collection or your publicist will have nothing to place as an excerpt.

ESB: *Aside from writing and Biblioasis, tell us a little about yourself and what your life looks like outside of work!*

MM: Toddler swim class is on Tuesdays. That's a big highlight! On weekends I like to take my daughter to the beach or Ojibway Park. We are potty training right now. She has a potty-time Elmo. He makes a peeing noise that she mimics. It's adorable.

ESB: *I don't know how you find the time, but I know you've been reading a lot of Biblioasis books! Have there been any that you've found particularly compelling since becoming a publicist at Biblioasis?*

MM: *Love Novel* is a stunning and savage little book about the challenge of giving and sustaining love under late capitalism. *Your Absence Is Darkness* is a haunting novel by a major voice in world lit. Stefánsson is a revelation. Oh, and *The Hollow Beast* is an unholy hybrid between a nineteenth-century family saga and

L: *Mémoire d'encrier's cover for the French edition of* Baldwin, Styron and Me. CENTRE *and* RIGHT: *cover designs by Gordon Robertson.*

the best maximalist postmodern writers (Pynchon and Foster Wallace). Publishing very good books makes my job much easier!

ESB: *Ok, speaking of good books, which three Biblioasis books are you bringing to a desert island?*

MM: I need four! It's my interview, so I'm taking four.

Frontlist: *Love Novel.* It's so good! I love a short and intense novel. Probably my favourite love story since Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair.*

Forthcoming: *Baldwin, Styron and Me.* When I read this in French, it was like making a new friend who is a terrific reader and invites you into a longstanding dialogue about what novels can and should do. I think anglophone readers will enjoy this ambitious hybrid text.

Backlist: *Zolitude,* Paige Cooper. She's a good friend and this book is terrifying, sexy, and wise about technologies both material and narrative (the means we use to make a world and also to make stories).

Far Backlist: *Alphabet* by Kathy Paige. This book about a prisoner learning to read and write to be able to access the world beyond the prison walls is about everything that matters: knowledge vs. self knowledge, intimacy vs. distance, and desire, for love, of course, but also desire to become someone worth knowing, for yourself and for others. So many books are about some kind of "reckoning." This one feels like the thing itself: what language is really for.

ESB: *Ok, I'll give you four! I sometimes forget that you're a francophone. Do you think that reading widely in both French and English has been beneficial to you as a writer and a publicist? Is there anything that francophone publishers are doing differently that we anglophones should adopt?*

MM: I think it's cool Flammarion has a Québecois iteration as well as one in France. Each branch has editorial independence, but they share a network and resources. Biblioasis has special relationships with MacLehose in the UK and I think this is one of the ways small and midsize presses can compete with conglomerates: collaboration! It's punk. It's feminist. It's the future.

ESB: *Last up . . . what are you currently reading?*

MM: I'm reading poet Monica McClure's *The Gone Thing.* A Texas poet by way of New York, *The Gone Thing* is a lyric narrative meditation on McClure's family history and a reckoning with the pastoral form, the way it lionizes the landscape and the legacy of extraction, making its metaphors complicit in a structure of feeling that paradoxically fixes people in time and place as static symbols while making them *feel* free. She upends the bucolic and her attention to detail, to the economy, and to the environment brings you through the mirage and into the real world of oil derricks, ranches, Family Dollars, strip clubs, and highways.

FROM VANESSA'S NOTEBOOK

RECENT PUBLISHING MEMOIR TITLES

This Atmospheric Et Cetera

Clowning or Drumming?

French Flaps Are for Novelists

How Can You See the Book If the Book Can't See You

Hot on the Commas

JC: The most important thing independent publishers could do for independent bookstores is to get big publishers to give us an extra ten percent discount. That's where the stress is. I was just in Minneapolis, which has Coffee House, Graywolf, Milkweed, three incredible small presses. Biblioasis is here. I basically only handsell small press books. I only staff pick them. Part of that is just an advocacy choice. I recognize that these are books that my customers are least likely to have encountered any other way. That's a very important thing for a bookseller to do, to make sure people encounter books that they would not otherwise. Another reason is because I have strong relationships with all of these publishers. They send me galleys, take me out to dinner, send me handwritten notes. It's a challenging question, Dan, because the direction is weird. I think independent bookstores and small presses are working about as well together as they can within their specific capacities. Where we get more capacity is not necessarily from each other. It's from other, more powerful spaces.

So, keep publishing great books. One of the things that really distinguishes a small press is its list, fewer books that they take better care of. There are so many books by big presses with huge lists that just lead to a bunch of pulped books in warehouses.

Y'all are doing great. I don't think we need more from you in order for us to work better together. We need movement in other places.

DC: I think that's true. I hate to tell a press like Biblioasis you gotta spend more money on us. We understand the economic reality of running an operation like this. We admire you so much for putting out such a great list—including *The Art of Libromancy,* which you can buy a signed copy of tonight—

JC: Nice, very nice. . .

DC: Sorry, I slip into host mode sometimes, because I usually host these things. Okay so, keep putting out amazing books. We love hanging out. We love building relationships with folks like Biblioasis. This is really inside baseball, but one of the paradoxes of bookselling is that on our end a huge percentage of the books we

order come from this giant company called Ingram. They distribute small presses, they wholesale everybody else. The dirty little secret is that Ingram is copying a lot of Amazon's behaviours. I sat in on a presentation by Ingram, and they were bragging about putting robots in warehouses and I was like, c'mon guys, read the room.

I don't think it's up to small presses to dream this up, but I would love to have some sort of book distribution that happened outside of Ingram. I would love a world in which Biblioasis and Two Dollar Radio wouldn't have to rely on Ingram.

DW: *It could happen . . .*

DC: One of my poetry publishers joined a bunch of tiny presses that were exiled from Small Press Distribution, which used to do this stuff and now are trying to sell themselves to Ingram. Some people from that scene got together and bought a warehouse. And Microcosm, my publisher for the last two books, have their own warehouses. They were like, we don't want to sell directly to Amazon. The only answer was to do your own distribution. That's not a move everybody can make, but I appreciate these gestures towards independence on our end. I love that Biblioasis is here doing this amazing work, but it hurts a little bit that it comes in Ingram boxes.

Again, I am not a logistics person, not a warehouse person, but I dream of a world where I can shop local with my ordering for the bookstore. I know that's not a sexy headline-bragging answer, but anything small presses can do to break the Ingram chokehold would be celebrated by a lot of bookstore buyers.

DW: *I believe that. I don't think it's quite as difficult here in Canada, but we rely on Ingram in the* US. *I mean Canadian publishing is really in crisis. The last study I read said that 4.5 percent of the market is independent, the rest is conglomerates. We've done an experiment in the past year, where we have tried to ensure that there are as many independently published books face out as there are corporately published books. Last October, I think 30 percent of our new book sales were independently published books, and it was just from increased visibility. I won't be able to convince Bertelsmann to give you 10 percent. But I also wonder if there is anything like those experiments that we could do?*

JC: You could do stack 'em high promotions. One of the tried and true techniques of bookselling is called stack 'em high, watch them fly. The idea is that if you pile a book, the pile itself will help sell the book. This is a perfect example of that. You apply it to books that aren't always sold in stackable—four or more—quantities. There are lots of reasons why it works. It makes it visible, it raises the question "Why do they have so many copies of this book?" and suggests the conclusion: because it is great. We all want to be together with people, and one way to do that is read the book everyone else is reading.

DW: *We've talked about the politics of the current moment. Is it possible for a bookstore to be apolitical?*

DC: I don't think it's possible for a bookstore to be apolitical ever. This is another theory I deal with a lot in my book. It comes from the feminist movement, which reached its peak in the late 80s. It was born in the 70s, crashed and burned in the 90s. Bookstores dedicated to promoting feminism in the United States, they used the entire store to advance the goals of feminism. Not only what the booksellers said and how they interacted with customers, but by arranging books in proximity to each other. I think this concept translates really well outside of the feminist movement.

Whether you are thinking about it or not, you are making an argument about your bookstore space depending on what you order, what you emphasize. The small press face outs is a great example. It's a powerful tool. Bookstores can either do it unknowingly or they can do it consciously. But they are doing it regardless. The decision to try to be apolitical is a political decision. There is nothing about bookselling that is not political. I think you can either diminish the potential of that or embrace it—because it is powerful.

JC: People use books to figure out what they believe, who they are, what's important to them, which is a long way of saying people use books to decide how they vote and who to support and what political actions to take. What books you surround your community with has an impact. We're here because books impact people in our lives. It's a baffling argument—that bookstores are apolitical.

Every single book is a decision. Every book on the shelf could be replaced by a hundred other books. But Dan sat and chose these books. They are all a decision. It reflects a value of some kind. It may be activist, partisan, aesthetic, but it's still a value. Ultimately, that value has some political content in the lives of people who read it. I agree with Danny. We have two choices about how to deal with the inherently political nature of bookstores. One is to diminish, downplay, and avoid it, shirking responsibility, and avoiding consequences for decisions. Or, we can be shelf-makers, we can lean into it. It doesn't have to be partisan or activist. It can be about small presses, marginalized voices, or your favoorite type of hard military sci-fi. Leaning into it allows the store to tell a story. Stories are always going to be more compelling than pitches.

DW: *This leans into my next question. You know how many books are published in a given year. I just did my October order. According to Bookmanager, which isn't completely accurate, I think twenty thousand titles were published in October. You can scrap a lot of them, but that is still a hell of a lot of books. Obviously, we have to make choices. This bookstore maybe has fifteen thousand titles. But one way or the other, of all the new books published in a given year, not counting backlist, I may carry seven to ten thousand newly published titles during the calendar year. Which doesn't even get me halfway through October! What guides you in selecting?*

DC: I think it's from the gut. I feel a bit ashamed at first, but then I become proud of that. This is a human act. It's an instinctual, human decision. And will resonate with another human. Did anyone ever go to an Amazon physical bookstore? It was fascinating. Really bizarre. An alternate, slightly worse universe. It was stocked entirely by algorithm. They would have a table in the front that was all products that had 4.7 stars or higher. So you would have a Cuisinart next to Jada Pinkett Smith's memoir next to a travel neck pillow. That's what happens when you take the human out of bookselling. When you only rely on the prediction of market value, you have a space that is alien and doesn't work.

This was a failed experiment. There were twenty-five of these stores, and now they are all gone. The fact I am trusting myself to make this decision based on my gut, or what I know about a press,

is okay. Nobody is making identical decisions to me, and no store will be identical to Raven, and that is a good thing.

There are books like Louise Penny. We have to carry Louise Penny. That's fine, because people come here to look for it. But is there something weird we can sell to readers of Louise Penny? Maybe Josh's weird postmodern mystery? I use data, but not to an extreme degree, and that's just a way to embrace the human magic of bookselling.

JC: I am not a buyer. I influence the store stock through how I handsell. But this question is an opportunity to tell you about sales reps. They are the unsung heroes of publishing. They are booksellers to booksellers. They get to know us like we get to know readers. They help us navigate the thousands of titles per month. They are an important part in this whole process. Danny's emphasis on the human role in buying is important because there is a human at every stage—from the artist writing it, to the editor making it better, to the publicist who is thinking about how to get into the world, to the truck driver getting it from the warehouse to the bookstore.

DW: *Does your buyer listen to people on the floor and their enthusiasms?*

JC: Oh for sure.

DW: *So you still have an impact on what the store stocks?*

JC: Absolutely. We have a relatively large staff. We have a "currently reading" staff channel, monthly staff picks. There is a lot of give and take. I don't know how you run a store successfully without that. You want the people in the store to know what is there, and the easiest way to do that is ask them to tell you what to put there.

DW: *I was at the first launch for Jeff Deutsch's* In Praise of Good Bookstores *in Detroit. It's both a fascinating and, for me, frustrating book. It led me to quip that evening that if he was there to praise good bookstores, then I was there to stand up for decent ones. Ever since, I have been thinking: what makes a good or decent bookstore? For me, if I was to reduce it to one thing, it would be the possibility of movement: between authors, genres, ideas. So, let me ask each of you: If you had to reduce the*

complexity that is a good bookshop to one basic thing, what would it be?

DC: I want to go to Janet Jones, the legendary owner of Source Booksellers across the river in Detroit, which is the Midwest's oldest Black-owned bookstore. As I researched this book, I was dancing around this idea that bookstores serve the community, bookstores reflect their community, bookstores *insert any number of verbs* here. Janet told me bookstores *are* the community. I was thinking incorrectly about the verbs. The more that sentence is true, the better the bookstore is. A dedication to local authors is important, and to local political causes actively working to make the community a better place. Tikkun olam is a philosophy in Judaism that is about fixing the world. But that starts on your block, inside your building, with the people who work in your store. I think about how well a bookstore fits into its community and serves it. There is no simple answer on how to do that, because that looks different in every bookstore. That is why I felt the need to write about twelve stores. I wanted to show this is a question with a lot of answers.

In fairness to Jeff, Seminary Co-op has done an amazing job for many, many years. I love that book, and I love how many arguments I have had about that book. A lot of the books written about bookstores are cute. Biblioasis is an exception with *Bookshops* by Jorgé Carrion. The fact that people are writing about bookselling right now and authentically is a real gift, and that wasn't true a couple of years ago.

JC: I have two answers. If it's a bookstore you've never been to before, notice how often you are surprised. That will mean that that store is reflecting either their own community or potentially the personality of the booksellers.

DC: I was surprised tonight multiple times already.

JC: Yeah—! And then if it's a bookstore you frequent a lot, notice when a bookseller waves you down and hands you a book and goes away. Because that means you have connected with that bookseller, they recognize you, they know what you want, and they give you a book knowing you are a part of their community. You'll trust their assessment. That's when you know a bookstore is doing the

right thing, allowing those relationships between booksellers and customers to happen. I'm a little biased but, if a bookseller does that, buy the book! It's going to be so good.

DW: *My last question, as it happens . . . I have two of the best booksellers in North America here tonight. Josh has an essay on the art of handselling, and I know handselling is essential to Danny. So I thought we could end with a little bit of your philosophy of handselling, and then pitching everybody on a book.*

JC: The most important thing to me about handselling is that there is always a leap. There is a leap of faith, a risk. I can't know everything about you, and you can't know everything about me or the book I am trying to sell you. But we still can connect through it and prove a connection is possible. More practically, you have to know about a shit ton of books, and keeping them in your head, listening to social cues, trying to work on your own language, but it all comes down to finding a way to get someone to jump across that gap with you. As for a book, do you guys have *The Long Form*?

DW: *We should . . . Kate Briggs right?*

JC: Yes. I wouldn't want to handsell a book that's not here . . .

DW: [wandering] *We have two copies right here! One, no . . . two!*

JC: *The Long Form* by Kate Briggs. She's made her name as a translator. This is a novel by an absolutely fantastic press called Dorothy: a Publishing Project, a feminist press. It is the story of a young mother navigating the facts of her motherhood and the caregiving that comes with it, while also reading Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, as a literary anchor. In *Tom Jones*, Henry Fielding is in the process of making the novel; she is in the process of making a human. One of the most important things that it does is highlight how rarely we have given powerful literary consideration to the simple things like holding a baby. From that she does really powerful things with how we become ourselves, how we don't become who we think we are, and the process of constant creation that comes with caretaking. It's a really important book. It will rewrite your brain.

DC: I resent being asked to follow Josh Cook. He is the master.

Handselling is really personal. It makes me really proud when I see customers becoming fans of a bookseller and buying their staff picks. It doesn't matter what their pick is this month, that customer will buy it. That is handselling at its best. Actually, one way small presses and independent bookstores could help each other is to resist the tyranny of the frontlist. For the non-bookstore people here tonight, we spend almost all of our attention on books within the first six months of their lives. Most of our thinking about books happens before they come out. But you love a book for many years.

I got an email about a tradeshow I am going to this week in Detroit. At trade shows, publishers give away galleys for forthcoming books. I don't remember which press is doing it, but instead they were like, come by our booth and pick up a backlist favourite.

My handselling philosophy is it doesn't matter how new your book is. If you want to make that your handsell or staff pick, go for it. I'm going to recommend a very old book. *84, Charing Cross Road.* If you are ever interested in reading about bookstores—

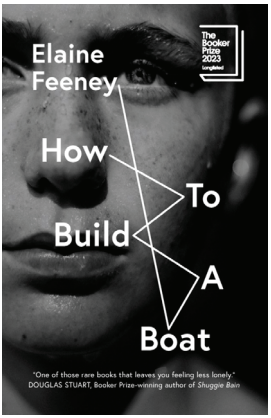
DW: *We have two!*

JC: This is *84, Charing Cross Road* by Helene Hanff. You can read it in an afternoon. I think it's really a memoir, but it's called a novel. It's about a cranky, elderly writer in New York City who is so persnickety about the books she orders. The manifestation of this is that she has developed a relationship via letters with a rare bookseller in London, which starts out very prickly and professional on both ends. But it becomes a platonic love story. They fall in love with each other as friends as a result of the books she is ordering. She gets to know the staff of this bookstore without ever visiting. It is beautiful and charming, a testament to the power of bookselling, and you should buy it because you'll just want to read it over and over again. Whenever I am in a reading slump or am mad at the world, *84, Charing Cross Road* is a great place to go and reset.

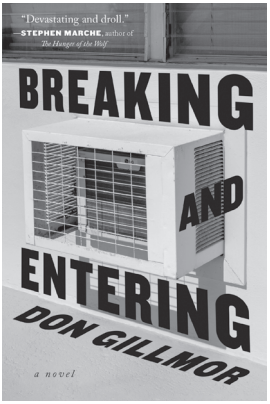
Other than Josh Cook's *The Art of Libromancy*, it's the greatest book ever written on bookselling.

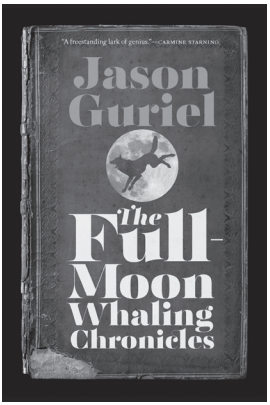
Sleep Is Now a Foreign Country by MIKE BARNES was reviewed in the *Midwest Book Review*, *The Miramichi Reader*, and *Publishers Weekly*, which notes, "The volume's particular magic lies in Barnes's adept use of free-flowing chronology and hallucinatory language to immerse readers in the depths of his psychosis…This isn't easy to forget." Barnes was also interviewed about the memoir on CBC Fresh Air.

The Hollow Beast by CHRISTOPHE BERNARD (trans. by Lazer Lederhendler) was reviewed in *Kirkus Reviews*, which wrote, "From rural Quebec, a sprawling, antic, alcohol-soaked family saga centered on a feud with the postman…full of slapstick and fresh, lively language and outlandishness…it's rollicking, inventive fun."

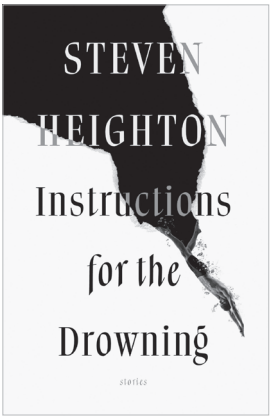


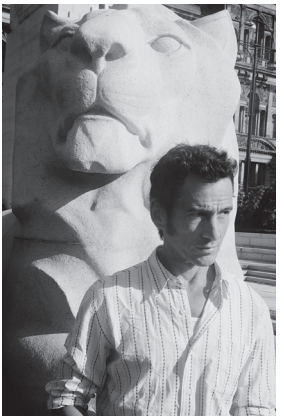
How to Build a Boat by ELAINE FEENEY was reviewed in the *New Yorker*'s "Briefly Noted" column, which called Feeney's prose "beautifully crisp." The *New Yorker* also included the book on their list of the "Best Books of 2023," while the *Globe and Mail* included it as part of "The *Globe* 100: Best Books of 2023."



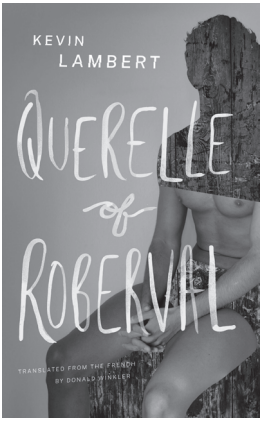


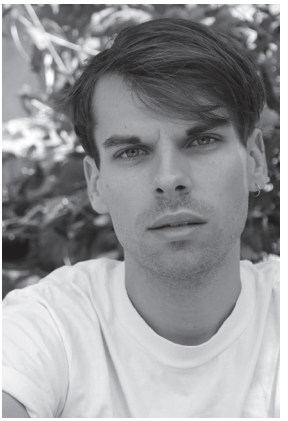
And speaking of The *Globe* 100: *How to Build a Boat* was joined by Don Gillmor's [CENTRE TOP] novel *Breaking and Entering* and JASON GURIEL's epic verse novel *The Full-Moon Whaling Chronicles.*



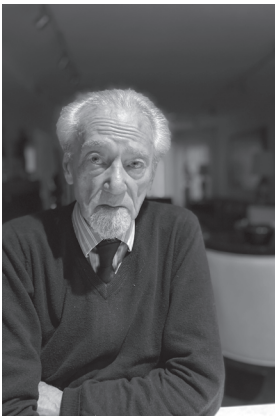


STEVEN HEIGHTON's short story collection *Instructions for the Drowning* also made the *Globe and Mail*'s "The *Globe* 100: The Best Books of 2023," and the *New Yorker* also selected the collection for their list of "The Best Books of 2023."

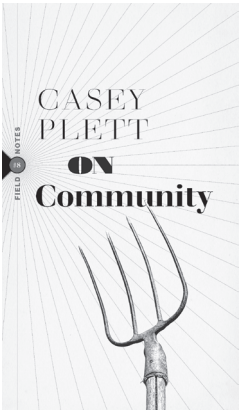




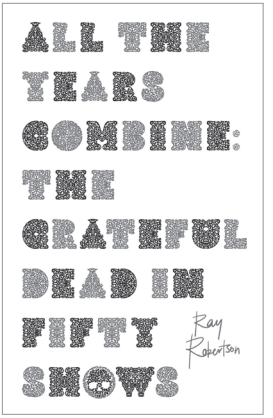
Querelle of Roberval by KEVIN LAMBERT has been longlisted for the Dublin Literary Award. The Dublin Literary Award, based on nominations from libraries, honours excellence in world literature annually since 1996 and is one of the most significant literature prizes in the world.



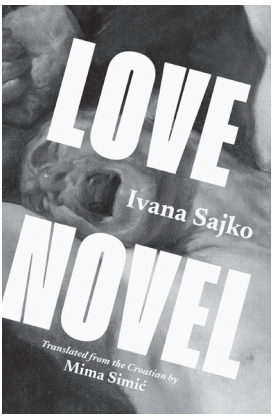
Off the Record, a collection of essays and fiction edited by JOHN METCALF, received reviews in *The BC Review*, which called it "Carefully wrought, tonally diverse, artful, thoughtful, revelatory, and nothing short of enticing," and the *Winnipeg Free Press*. Contributor Caroline Adderson was also interviewed in Open Book about her experience contributing to the collection.



CASEY PLETT's Field Note, *On Community*, was selected as a CBC Books Best Canadian Nonfiction of 2023.

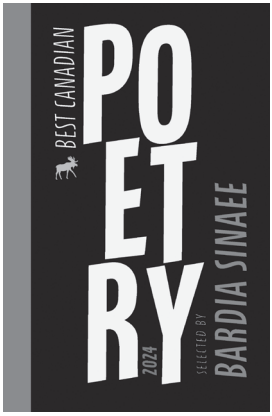


All the Years Combine by RAY ROBERTSON has been reviewed in numerous publications, including SPIN *Magazine* and *Palo Alto Weekly*, and was listed as one of *Bad Feeling Magazine*'s "Best of 2023: Our favourite pop-culture books of the year."

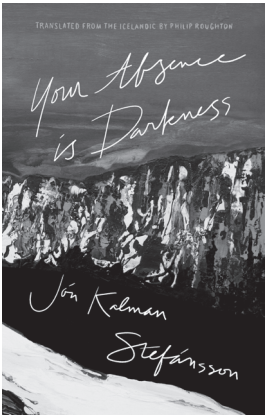


IVANA SAJKO's *Love Novel* (trans. by Mima Simić) received a *Kirkus* starred review and was featured on *The Millions* as one of their "Most Anticipated Titles of 2024." *Love Novel* has also been named to the February 2024 Indie Next list, selected by bookseller vote, by the American Booksellers Association.

SETH's 2023 Christmas Ghost Stories have received reviews in the *Literary Review of Canada* and *Cemetery Dance Magazine*. Illustrated excerpts from the books were also featured in the LRC's online newsletter *The Bookworm*.

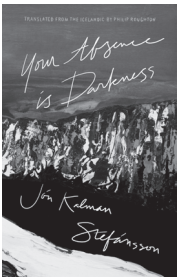


Best Canadian Poetry 2024 editor BARDIA SINAEE wrote an article for the *Literary Review of Canada* on Canadian poetry and assembling the anthology.



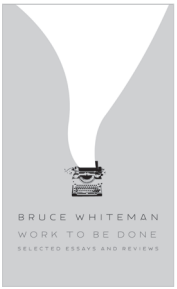
Your Absence Is Darkness by JÓN KALMAN STEFÁNSSON received a starred review in *Publishers Weekly*, who writes: "Stefánsson is poised to make his mark on the world stage." The novel has also received a coveted Indie Next List pick, selected by bookseller vote, from the American Booksellers Association for March 2024—making it the second Biblioasis Indie Next pick of the young year.

FORTHCOMING FROM BIBLIOASIS



Your Absence Is Darkness
Jón Kalman Stefánsson
Philip Roughton, trans.

A spellbinding saga about the inhabitants and inheritors of one rural community, by one of Iceland's most beloved novelists.



Work to Be Done: Selected Essays and Reviews
Bruce Whiteman

Whiteman demonstrates the cohesion of his varied body of work in this erudite and eclectic tour of his finest critical investigations.

The Hollow Beast
Christophe Bernard
Lazer Lederhendler, trans.

Don Quixote meets *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* in this slapstick epic about destiny, family demons, and revenge.

Sorry About the Fire
Colleen Coco Collins

Hermetic and beguiling, sensuous and musical, *Sorry About the Fire* introduces not just a poet, but a stunningly original sensibility.

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