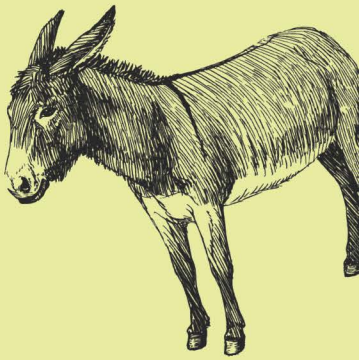



TWENTY YEARS OF TILTING AT WINDMILLS


THE BIBLIOPHILE

Number Seven


The 7 Bibliophile

NEWS FROM THE BIBLIOMANSE

Some Features in this Issue

From Our Bookshop to Yours

THE LAUNCH OF this seventh issue of *The Bibliophile*, Biblioasis's charmingly irregular press publication, coincides with 2025's Independent Bookstore Day. California bookseller and writer Samantha Schoech organized the first Independent Bookstore Day as a regional celebration in 2014, but it expanded into a national event the following year, making this year Independent Bookstore Day's tenth anniversary. The event was born out of the urgent need for advocacy and awareness at a time when the very existence of such bookstores was threatened, and it was an opportunity as well to celebrate their role within the literary, local, and wider communities they serve.

Ten years ago, the demise of independent bookstores across the English-speaking world was believed to be inevitable. The previous decade had been disastrous. Decimated by large, conglomerate chains such as Barnes and Noble and Borders in the US and Indigo in Canada, undercut at every turn by Amazon, and facing inflationary costs that made it even more difficult for booksellers to survive in the communities they'd long served, things had gotten so bad by 2009 that the American Bookseller Association saw its membership drop by nearly 50 percent. The same year, the Canadian Booksellers' Association disbanded. There was a sense that bookstores—and perhaps printed books themselves—were anachronisms that no longer served a necessary function in a digital age.

Independent bookstores have long been one of the few places where capital and culture coexist, even if not always comfortably. Most are run as for-profit ventures, though making money has almost never been their primary motivation. One of my many working definitions of independent publishing has been "Idealism, and how to pay for it": this applies equally to most of independent bookselling. Booksellers do what they do for a range of reasons beyond the mercenary: love, advocacy, as a form of community engagement and outreach, a commitment to making the world, starting with their individual neighbourhoods, a better place. Bookstore owners regularly make decisions which can never be justified via an accountant's spreadsheet; they stock independently published literature as a form of cultural service (and because they believe in

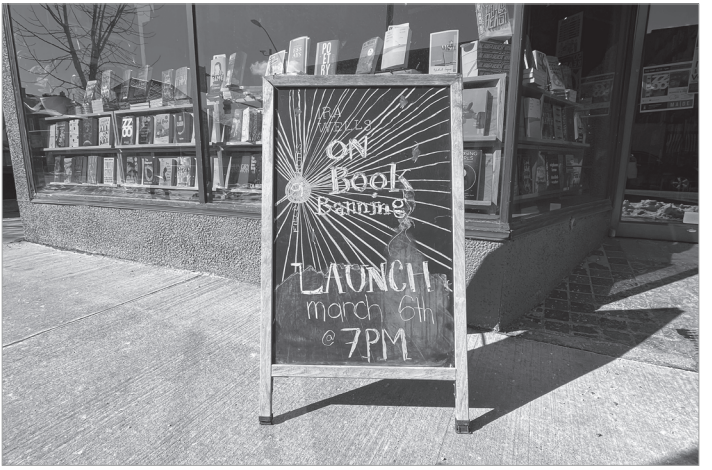
its value); they work with and encourage local writers and artists; they keep books they believe in on the shelves far longer than their conglomerate cousins, increasing the likelihood that they will be discovered; they take an active interest in the success of the books they love, and the customers they know will love those books as much as they do; they allow their shops to be third spaces. Booksellers are at the front lines, alongside librarians, in the battles over censorship and freedom of expression. And this list only begins to capture the ways that bookshops contribute. Every bookshop reflects the individual predilections and passions and decisions of the people who run them; each reflects the individual communities they serve. If you are blessed to have more than one independent bookstore in your community, you'll find books on the shelves of one that you will never find in the other, and vice versa, books you would likely never have otherwise discovered.

Perhaps it is for these reasons, among many others, that independent bookstores have experienced a renaissance over the last decade, over which time hundreds have opened across the continent, with a new generation of booksellers figuring out, individually and collectively, how to make this business work, striking a balance between idealism and commerce and in the process showing us different ways businesses can operate. And readers, who understand the importance of freedom of choice, and who thrill to the possibility of analog discovery, the power of the browse, are supporting them in greater measure every year. Perhaps this is happening because we all know better now what's been lost, and what's worth fighting for. And this, too, is a reason to celebrate Independent Bookstore Day. The survival of these individual businesses gives us so much—including, at this politically uncertain time, hope.

Happy Independent Bookstore Day.

DAN WELLS
BOOKSELLER AND PUBLISHER
MARCH 2025

A Conversation with Ira Wells



Our bookshop chalkboard welcomes guests to the launch of On Book Banning.

IN MARCH, IRA Wells joined us for the Windsor launch of *On Book Banning*. We recorded Ira's discussion with our publisher, Dan Wells (no relation), and we're delighted to bring it to you here.

DAN WELLS: *Your book, Ira, opens with a very personal story: that of a parent, you, sitting in a child's library chair, your knees up around your ears in their school library, one of the occasions that certainly instigated the writing of the book. Would you mind starting the evening by telling us a little bit about this experience, and what the result was?*

IRA WELLS: It did, yeah, not all great stories begin with an email from a school principal, but this one does. I received an email in 2022 from the principal of my kids' elementary school indicating that they were initiating something called a "library audit." And there was something about that phrase that struck me as interesting. By this point, we'd already been hearing a lot about the book banning that had been taking place in Florida and other places in the southern United States, and I wondered if "library audit" wasn't just an innocuous, boring-sounding description, and if it came to Toronto, if that is what they would call it—a "library audit." It turned out to be a little more complicated than that.

So, I joined a parent committee to see what was going on and we were given something called a TDSB—Toronto District School Board—Equity Toolkit, which we were going to use to evaluate books. Then we were asked to pick five books off the shelves more or less at random. And a couple of things jumped out at me immediately in this exercise. One is that if you were to actually *use* this toolkit, to go through and apply it to every book in the library, there is not enough time in your life to do it. And so at a certain point the principal became somewhat exasperated and said, "I just wish we could get rid of all the old books." And I thought she was maybe kidding. At least, I hope that she was.

But the following fall, in the Peel Region (which is in the Mississauga area), in some school libraries, up to 50 percent of the books had been removed from the shelves. They really had gone through and got rid of all the old books, which was somewhat horrifying. But that's the genesis of *On Book Banning*. I was working on something else, but the moment where I realized I needed to pay more attention to this was when all those books were liquidated from the shelves of Peel Region, because I realized I didn't really have the vocabulary or the arguments to respond. I'm an English professor, but I didn't have at the tip of my tongue the words to articulate why books matter, why banning them is wrong, and why we need to pay attention when this is happening in our society. Because it's not just an American problem: it's also happening here. That's why I wanted to dive deeper into it.

DW: So, when you were sitting there in the library before the Peel cull, one of the things they did, if I remember correctly, is basically decide that any book that had been published more than fifteen years prior was too old to be on the shelves. They considered it "dangerous," right?

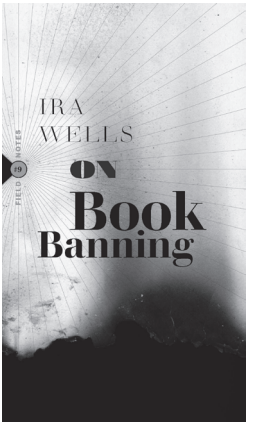
IW: The situation in Peel was this: there was a student named Reina Takata, who was a Grade 10 student at Erindale Secondary School in Mississauga. She was the kind of girl who went to the library, ate her lunches in the library, was very familiar with the library. She came back after summer vacation in Grade 10 and realized that, in her estimation, half of the books were gone.

The CBC picked this story up and reported on it. We don't actually know—there are 259 schools in Peel Region—we don't know

and will never know how many books were removed during this process. But we do know two things. One, as Dan said, they had settled upon this fifteen-year lifespan, so anything that had been published more than fifteen years beforehand was ripe for removal. And the second thing we know is, because these books were deemed "harmful," they could not be donated to families in need, they could not be given to jurisdictions that could have used them. They were boxed up more or less like toxic waste and disposed of.

DW: We'll get back to this idea of harm later on because I think it's kind of central to how both the right and the left have talked about what they're doing. Both the examples that we've started with are, I guess one could argue, examples of the left banning books or removing books from libraries. You also talk about things that have happened in Florida and elsewhere in the US. *Do you want to give a bit of background about that side as well?*

IW: Absolutely, and I think in some ways this may be the more familiar version of the book banning story. At least it was to me until I started paying more attention. There are a number of parents' rights organizations, like Moms for Liberty, No Left Turn in Education, and there are Canadian counterparts. They're sometimes described as anti-government organizations. And they got very interested in the content of school libraries during COVID. They're particularly concerned with books they call LGBTQ indoctrination. This could be anything that has a queer character, even, so something like *Drama* by Raina Telgemeier—a graphic novel that is very popular with the kids—or, not to mention, anything that has a sort of sex-ed dimension to it. But anything with a queer character. They're also very interested in race, so anything that sort of smacks of what they would call critical race theory, or anything that casts slavery in a negative light. Including Toni Morrison. They go after these books, and they do it in a very specific way. They have game plans: they meet up in the parking lot beforehand, they have matching T-shirts, they divvy up their questions, and it's almost like tailgating, and there's this culture around it. They converge on school council meetings and they use their allotted five minutes, and they drag these meetings out—sometimes they're seven hours long—and they've been pretty successful at getting books off the shelves.



L: *Ira Wells.* R: *Field Notes series design by Ingrid Paulson.*

So, this is the right-wing version, the evangelical version, the populist version. They do delightful things, like they've started to harass teachers directly by providing a list of books to a teacher and saying, "If you teach any one of these books, we're going to sue you or bring some sort of legal action against you." I've heard of lawsuits, the threat of lawsuits, against people who have the Little Free Libraries you may have seen around. If you have something they deem obscenity in those Little Free Libraries, they'll threaten a lawsuit. And they will often threaten librarians with legal action or just make their lives a living hell. The free speech organization PEN America has been very attentive to this and has been tracking the number of challenges. In 2023 or 2024, they put the number at ten thousand challenged titles. But there is also some research that shows between 83 and 97 percent of book challenges are never reported. So it's almost certainly much, much higher than what we know.

What I found very interesting about the Canadian progressive version and the evangelical version is that they both seem to construe books as a source of contagion, as a source of harm, and they both advocate the same solution, which is to censor them, to get them off the shelves. I was very struck by the fact that you've got these two groups: progressive educators in Ontario and Southern evangelicals who appear to be political opposites in every possible way. Yet they think about books in a very similar way, and they have the same problem, which is they think books are causing harm to children, and they have the same solution, which is to ban them.

DW: I'm sure the principal in your children's school would be horrified if you pointed out to her she was using arguments that a DeSantis conservative would use in Florida, and yet they were basically identical. Just for different purposes. But there's something else that I think unites both the DeSantis conservative evangelical movement and maybe the more liberal one: they both deny that what they are doing is book banning—we should probably define book banning. And how does it relate to what you call in this book the "new censorship consensus"?

IW: That's a good point, Dan. No one considers themself a censor, no one identifies as a book banner, which is why I think it's really important to go back to the definition. The American Library Association defines book banning as the removal of a title from the shelves because someone deems it harmful. And what strikes me about that definition is how precisely it is describing the rationale of well-intentioned people on the political right and on the political left who believe that they are removing sources of harm from libraries.

I should say that the action the Peel Region took they described in their own words as an "equity-based book weeding process." And that's another term that we should unpack. Because weeding is actually something that librarians do. Weeding is a legitimate part of developing a library collection, and it refers to things like, if a book is falling apart, you weed it, if a book is out of date you weed it. It is a legitimate process, but again, to go back to the definition: the American Library Association says that while weeding is an essential part of the development collection process, it is never a *de*selection tool for controversial material. They want to have a very sharp line between censorship, which is not legitimate, and weeding, which is. And so, when the Peel Region says "oh we're just doing this weeding process and getting rid of all the books we don't find equitable," that's in fact an abuse of the weeding process and they *are* book banning.

DW: I want to also step back a bit and talk a little bit about this idea of harm. I have a sensitivity and appreciation for some of the arguments that are made about the idea of harm. You know, the idea that some books, some words, some language, can be triggering. What's your response to that?

What's your response to the idea that what they're really trying to do is not just ensure that everybody is represented in the library, but they're trying to protect people from harm?

IW: It's a good question, and it's an unavoidable one. I would just preface my answer by stating that I don't want to be misconstrued as saying that we should *only* have old books in the libraries or that we should only have what we would think back on as the kinds of books that we remember from our childhoods. I'm not advocating that at all. I think we should have diverse libraries, I think that the children who go to our schools need to be able to go to the libraries and find books that tell stories that they relate to, which includes having very diverse collections. I fully believe that children should see their own stories reflected in those pages. It's not at all hard to find stories of LGBTQ-identifying people who say that they read a story or they engaged with a narrative about a queer character and that it changed their life, it validated their life, and that it saved their life. It's not at all hard to find stories of people saying, "That book saved my life." I think we should listen to them, and we need to be damn sure that those books aren't banned and taken off the shelves.

Now, to the point about harm and what we do in the inverse case where someone says this book is causing harm—there are policies and procedures in place which are being abused in places like Pensacola, Florida, which is a place I look at in the book, where parents will use the book-challenging process to say "This book is not an appropriate book because it's actually child pornography." Or it's LBGTQ indoctrination. The mechanisms that we have in place to take harmful books off the shelves are often weaponized against the material that we should be saving. So, that's the first thing I would say.

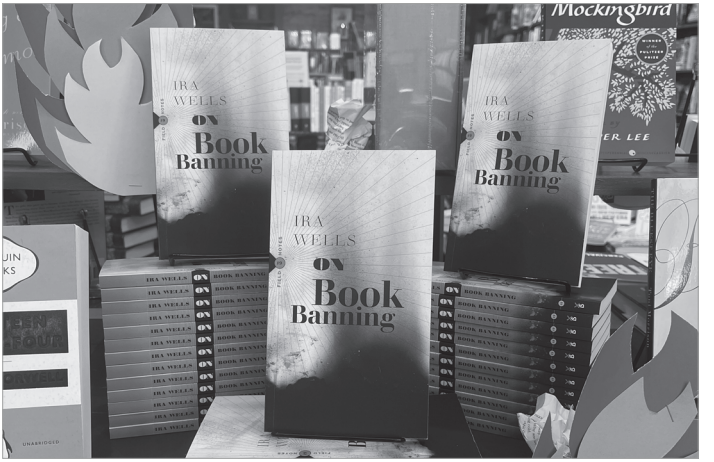
The second thing I would say, and I'm just leaning into the policies of the school boards and of the libraries themselves, is that harm is not something that can be experienced subjectively by the person who is making the complaint. What I mean by that is, if I'm a parent and I'm outraged about something that I'm seeing in a book and it offends me, my offense, my personal offense, is not a legitimation, is not a rationale, for removing a book from the library or from the school. Because we cannot give every single parent veto power to remove books from the libraries or every single citizen veto power

L: *Standing room only for Ira's Windsor launch.*

to remove books from the libraries. We live in a very large, very diverse, pluralistic society, and if we give that kind of veto power to one group, we have to give it to all groups, and this is not a paradox that we can work our way out of. We either defend freedom of information, which may include material that is found offensive, or we don't, but I don't think we want to live in a world in which everyone gets a veto power over what you get to read.

DW: You tell some great stories about writers like Ta-Nehisi Coates, who read Macbeth *and found it gave him insight into Baltimore, life on the streets in Baltimore. One of the unintended consequences even of the Peel cull and picking the fifteen-year window is that there were many books that all of us would acknowledge need to be on every library's shelves, like* The Diary of Anne Frank *or* Obasan, *or works of Canadian history that were cut. That were removed merely by being published before that date. And it seems to me that this approach is based on a lack of awareness of how publishing works. There seems to be this idea that we can remove old books because the new ones will fill all the gaps, but quite often, especially in Canada, because of the constraints on publishing, that isn't possible either. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that.*

IW: Yeah, absolutely. As you mentioned, the category of "classic" was one that the progressive educators in Peel were particular-



R: *Display courtesy of our crafty and creative booksellers, who excel in unexpected shelftalkers and papercraft. (No books were harmed.)*

ly hostile to. I know this because they had a little manual that they distributed internally that was then leaked, which is in the footnotes of the book. They instruct people who are doing this equity-based weeding process to cast particular skepticism towards what they call classics. Which they say are inherently Eurocentric and heteronormative and bad in other ways. I would just say a couple of things about that. One is that they are using the word *classic* as it was used about a hundred years ago, and I'm not kidding about that. Like when people talked about "great books" programs in 1925, that I think is what they have in mind. But certainly since the 1960s, the Western canon has been diversified and challenged, and certainly as far as University of Toronto students are concerned in 2025, the category of classic includes Toni Morrison, includes James Baldwin, includes Ralph Ellison, includes so many of the people who would be banned for being outdated in this new rubric.

By coming up with this arbitrary date, by saying "Okay, our libraries, our school libraries, will include everything published in the last fifteen years," I think the rationale is that they are thinking the books need to reflect the life experiences of the students. And so if the students are fifteen, the books should be published within the last fifteen years. Obviously that leads to a presentism that is kind of horrifying for many of us, in the idea that children would

never read the same books as their parents, that you wouldn't be learning about Japanese internment, you wouldn't be reading *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Or, if you were, you would only be reading about it through a very presentist sort of perspective. But to your point, Dan, the Canadian publishing industry could not replenish a library every fifteen years, especially a children's library. It would leave us much more dependent on American content, and we will lose so much. It's kind of mind-boggling in its naivete to assume we can simply replenish libraries every fifteen years.

DW: At one point in the book you explain that censorship confronts us with literature's opposite, and I wondered if you might say a little bit about what you meant by that.

IW: Well, Dan challenged me to actually describe what I like about literature, which is hard for someone who has tried to make that the centre of his life. But one way that I came to think of it: literature asks us, it leaves us, with questions, it prompts more dialogue. If you read a really great book, you want to talk about it. You want to talk about it in a book club. When you close the book, you want to Google it. You want to find out what other people have been saying about it. You want to go on Goodreads. My students would go on BookTok, on TikTok or whatever, but the point is that it opens conversations, it spurs more dialogue.

When you really think about the best books, they're never reducible to a single message. They're always full of voices, especially novels. Novels are full of voices, they're never reducible to a single political point, and this I think is censorship's opposite. Censorship wants to limit something to a single propagandistic message that we can either be for or against. Censorship confronts us with answers, it has all the answers. It closes conversations rather than opening them. So I think that censorship, and the way that it pretends to have all the answers, and the way that it tries to shut people up, is essentially the opposite of what I love about literature and what I think draws us to literature itself.

DW: Is there a difference between freedom of expression and freedom, or the right, to read? I mean, is there any tension there? This is just a question

I was thinking about this evening; we didn't really talk about that too much while editing the essay, but do they entail different rights or different responsibilities?

IW: I think they are two versions of the same right, and I'll explain what I mean by that. What I found hard to articulate to that school principal is why I find book banning so offensive. Why do I find it so personally offensive? And undemocratic, in fact. And also illiberal, which is maybe something else. If freedom means anything in our society, it means the freedom to cultivate our own minds, to think what we want to think, to determine the course of our thoughts and our education, and all that is tied in with what we read. And book banning and censorship are not only about deciding what you're allowed to read, but about deciding what you're allowed to think, and what kind of a mind you're allowed to cultivate for yourself. Which is such a profoundly illiberal idea, that someone would interfere with the process in which you are cultivating your own mind.

20 Stores —for— 20 Years

Celebrating our recent birthday with twenty of our favourite independent bookshops.

We love the Field Notes series. These are three of our favourites: *On Property*, *On Community*, and *On Class*. Short, concise, accessible and on topic conversations by well known writers!

LAURA ASH AND ANJULA GOGIA,
ANOTHER STORY (TORONTO, ON)

I think that is a profoundly problematic idea and is what book banners and censors are trying to do. But I think it relates to your point, Dan, about freedom of expression. Because why do we have freedom of expression in our society? It's not only because you have the right to think and speak what is on your mind. It's about my right to hear it. And that, I think, makes it complementary to your point about the right to read.

DW: We are all gathered here in a bookstore—let's assume we all value books. I, as a publisher, as a bookseller, as a reader, have made a very large commitment to literature and books as part of my life. And yet, I've been struggling with a contradiction of sorts that I'm hoping you can help me with. I still wonder why it is that at a time that books—for some people, present company excluded—have never seemed less central to the average person's life, when people have so much access to so much else via the internet, when information has never seemed more free . . . whatever that means. Why, at this moment in time, has the effort to ban books become so increasingly common?

IW: I have to push back on one point, because I don't think the internet is particularly free. Maybe we can talk more about that in a second, but here's the statistic that sent chills up my spine and we'll see if it has the same effect on you. There's something called the American Time Use Survey that is done by the Department of Labor. Essentially they look at how many minutes per day Americans—it's an American survey—spend on any given thing. It turns out, and they break this down by every demographic and age and so on, for students, so people between the ages of fifteen and nineteen, the average American spends 9 minutes a day reading and about 4 to 4.5 hours on their smartphones. So, to your point, why is it at this moment where students, high school students, are spending about 9 minutes a day reading for pleasure, are we that worked up about what it is they're reading? When for a third of their waking lives they are on TikTok or they are on social media and we have no control over—well, most of us—have no control over what our children are doing on those things?

I think there's something compensatory going on. In a sense that it's precisely because we have no control. It's so ephemeral, what

kids are experiencing online. You see something that may offend or bother you: it's there one minute and it's gone the next. Where do you go if you're upset by something that you see, where do you protest? Well, people think they've found an answer in books because there's somewhere, there's a library, there's a physical place that they can go. They feel like they can exert some kind of control,

As John Milton recognized over four hundred years ago, bad ideas can spread perfectly easily without books.

right? If you're the sort of person that thinks that LGBTQ literature is going to indoctrinate your child, there's very little you can do about the online world. But you can go to your children's school and make a stink about it and pull a book or two from the shelves.

Even if this might seem absurd on its face, as if it could actually work, we need to think about how censorship *is* working. It's working in a couple of different ways. It might not work in the sense that it might not be preventing your children from actually accessing that material, which, yes, they will find online. But it might work by keeping it out of their hands at an impressionable life stage. Or, it might work as a way of bringing a political community together to say "We don't stand for this sort of thing." In other words it allows for a community to congeal against a scapegoat. That's another kind of work that censorship is doing. I think that regardless of where you are on the political spectrum, be it left or right, there is a bad habit of thinking about libraries as microcosms of society and books as levers. Where if we want to make society a little more of this or a little less that, the way we'll go about this is by pulling this book, pulling that book, and that's going to exert some sort of change on society.

As John Milton recognized over four hundred years ago, bad ideas can spread perfectly easily without books. And they do.

DW: There is an element of symbolic violence in how a lot of people approach book banning. But you brought up Milton, which leads right into my next questions. One of the most interesting and best parts of this book is a survey of at least two thousand years of censorship, from the Romans through Milton and right up to the great twentieth-century censorship trials of Joyce and Lady Chatterley's Lover *and others. I love Milton's*

argument that if you put truth and falsehood out there in the world, truth will win out. I am less certain, at this moment in time, still, that that may be true. Milton was saying that relatively shortly after the printing press and the rise of literacy and books as a new technology. We're now in a new era faced by a new technology that is changing our relationship to truth. And I'm less and less certain as I look at the world, especially at this particular moment, that truth will win out against falsehood. So I guess I'm looking for assurance more than anything at all? That maybe the classic Miltonian arguments still have relevance? Help me.

IW: Well I'm going to be the really pedantic and annoying English professor and say we should turn back to the text. Because what Milton actually says is "Whoever knew, in a free and open encounter, truth to be submerged by falsehood." But the key part of the phrase is in a *free and open encounter*, whoever knew truth to be beat by a falsehood. So, Milton is saying if you just let truth and falsehood fight it out, truth will rise to the top. It's an inspiring idea, and Dan doesn't believe in it.

DW: I'm just concerned!

IW: But to me the key part of that phrase in the context of social media is "a free and open encounter." Because I don't believe that our social media algorithms constitute a free and open encounter. I think that those algorithms are driving certain kinds of content to the top and that what constitutes truth on the internet is certainly not what John Milton would consider truth, and maybe you too.

But, okay, one more thought to leave you with on this is that in the heat of the COVID misinformation fever, someone—and I think it was someone in the Biden administration—decided that the lab leak theory was racist and nonsense and was misinformation and it shouldn't be on Twitter. And I'm not particularly educated on any of this but I do know that the working theory the FBI now has is something along the lines of the lab leak theory. And so, the idea is that if we censor this, we get it wrong. And this is part of what makes censorship so insidious. We get it wrong, and we get it wrong so often that I would err on letting truth and falsehood battle it out even if it's not a free and open encounter.

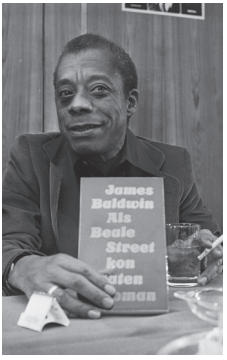
DW: I'll just ask one more question. Given what we're facing, how can we future-proof our freedom to read and our freedom of expression?

IW: Funding libraries, funding librarians, giving them our full support. Defending our librarians so that they can defend our intellectual freedom, ensuring that there are librarians in schools, ensuring that the schools are properly funded. So many schools these days don't have a proper school librarian, they're just not funded. The school libraries aren't getting the funding that they need, the public libraries aren't getting the funding that they need, and if you don't have someone there who knows the collection, who can safeguard it, who knows why books were selected in the first place, you lose the advocate for the library. I think that would be one big thing.

But I think that also we need to get over our trepidation around defending expressive freedom. I consider myself a person of the left, and people of my political orientation have largely given up on free expression, and especially on free speech. Because that has become such a toxic phrase for so many people because of right-wing demagogues who have taken it up. Or you will hear the argument that free speech has never applied to some groups, which is true. That if you look at the history, which I do in this book, that there has been persecution of gay and lesbian and queer bookstores and queer writers and queer presses all throughout history and well into the 1990s. In Canada! So people will say, well there's never *been* free speech, there's never *been* freedom of expression, this is a hypocritical idea! And my point is that just because there has not been a golden age of free expression does not mean that we can give up on the ideal of free expression, because once we do that we are in serious trouble. And maybe that's where I would leave that.

Bill and Jimmy

An excerpt from BALDWIN, STYRON, AND ME by Mélikah Abdelmoumen




L: *James Baldwin, ©Rob Croes/Anefo.* CENTRE: *William Styron, ©William Waterway.* R: *Mélikah Abdelmoumen, ©Memoire D'encrier/Marjorie Guindon).*

EDITOR'S NOTE: In 1961, James Baldwin spent several months living in William Styron's guesthouse. The two became close friends, writing during the day and talking late into the night about race in the United States. During one of these conversations, Baldwin is said to have convinced Styron to write, in first-person, the story of the 1831 slave rebellion led by Nat Turner. He did, and The Confessions of Nat Turner *was published to critical acclaim, winning the Pulitizer Prize—and sparking outrage in parts of the African American community. In* Baldwin, Styron, and Me, *Mélikah Abdelmoumen imagines their interactions with one another—and even with their own characters— and considers the story of this unlikely friendship through the lens of her own racialized identity and our contemporary debates about race, appropriation, and equity.*

ONE DAY IN 1936, twelve-year-old James Baldwin went to the theatre with his white teacher. She spent a lot of time with him, introducing him to books, to culture, and she would sometimes also give his family hand-me-down clothes. That would send the Reverend Baldwin into a rage. Son of a slave, exhausted by work and poverty, he was more than a little suspicious of whites.

A new version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was playing in town. It was directed by Orson Welles, who'd been recruited by the Federal Theatre Project's Negro Unit production by Rose McClendon,

an African-American actress, director, and producer. Their *Voodoo Macbeth*, with its entirely Black cast, brought Welles criticism from all sides. He nonetheless spoke of it as a major political event. He was concerned that the performance would provoke riots, despite the heavy police presence, because some members of the Black community thought that *Voodoo Macbeth* was meant to be a mockery or a burlesque. It was quite the opposite for Welles; he swore that he never imposed on the actors a "white tradition of doing Shakespeare." The actors themselves determined the diction and their style of performance. "They have such a strong musical and rhythmic sense, the Blacks, and they are so good at speech, they found their way of doing Shakespeare."

That sense of rhythm that Blacks are supposed to have…

I know these words have their context and belong to their time, and we have to try to understand where Orson Welles was speaking from… But in spite of myself, as someone who is watching and listening to him in 2021, impassioned, speaking this way about his actors, I can't help but cringe. I can only imagine how those who were in the play must have felt.

But far from feeling the discomfort that I felt listening to Welles in 2021, in 1936, the young Baldwin found this moment to be transformational. For the first time, seeing people who looked like him on the stage, Jimmy felt seen. Until that moment, he'd had to settle for Bette Davis, whom he ogled in the darkness of the cinema, identifying with her because, as James said, she had the same bulging eyes he did.

Bill and Jimmy spent their days writing. Toward the end of the afternoon, they'd get together and spend most of the evening talking and drinking heavily, at first with Bill's wife, Rose, and then just the two of them, sometimes well into the night.

Sometimes James read excerpts of *Another Country* out loud to William. Neither could have known that the novel would become both a bestseller and a major scandal. (Strangely, what seemed to be most shocking, apparently, was the tragic love affair at the beginning of the story, between a white woman and a Black man.) Sometimes when James left William, he'd return to the guest house to get back to his writing, drinking and chain smoking late into the night, as he would continue to do throughout his life.

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Interior. The Styrons' guest room. Night. James returns after one of those evenings spent with William. Lying on the bed, barefoot and wearing a black slip, her eyeliner running down her cheeks, is a beautiful young blonde woman, slumped over and in tears. She glares at James.

LEONA

Why did you kill Rufus? Why are you making it seem impossible for a white woman to love a Black man? You made me love him, love him to death, and you made him hate himself for loving me, and hate me for loving him, until it killed him. Until he threw himself off that damned bridge.

JAMES

Real love between Black people and white people is going to remain impossible as long as whites love us for the wrong reasons, Leona, my dear: To redeem themselves. To love themselves for loving us. How can we not hate whites if the only reason you love us is because it allows you to see yourselves in a better light. Because you want to be convinced that we are capable of loving you back? That you are good people and that we shouldn't hold a grudge against you? That is not love, Leona. And it is why I could only write a tragic ending to your story with Rufus.

LEONA

But you did make me love him. You created me in an attempt to get beyond all of that. And then you killed him. You killed him!

JAMES

Poor Leona, I know. For people like the two of you, it's dangerous to love each other in this country even as it is today. If nothing changes, there will continue to be suicides. Do you want a drink?

She hides her face in the pillow, sobbing, as he fills two whisky tumblers. He holds one out to her, but she doesn't notice. He sits

on the side of the bed and gently touches her shoulder with the glass. She sits up and grabs it.

He looks at her, smiling sadly, then goes back to sit at his typewriter. She drinks.

Remembering those months he spent with Baldwin, Styron writes that James was the first person who helped him understand what it feels like when you are turned away in a shop, when someone spits in your face, when someone casually calls you boy, even though you're grown up, even though you're old, or they might say something even worse yet.

("Hey, Mohamed, you tell me, how do people in your country pick up sausages?")

Styron wrote that before he knew Jimmy there was a part of him that still believed that a Black man could not be as intelligent as a white man. Despite his best efforts to escape all the prejudices he'd been taught, he did still believe this, yes, a little, sometimes.

I can see them from here. James proving to William, night after night, for months on end, the arrogance and folly of this notion. And William has no right to any deference. James does not give him an inch. Well, actually, he does give him something. Something pretty important: his friendship, and his loyalty. And the gift of his courage, too, in the face of the banal magnanimity of William and his liberal, white friends who come over for a bite to eat or a drink at the Styrons' in Roxbury.

James likes to rattle them a little, all the while smiling brightly.

JAMES

Baby, yes, baby. I mean burn. We will burn your cities down.

I can picture William watching his liberal-minded friends, their mouths hanging open, the blood drained from their faces, now whiter than white, facing this brazen Black man bursting their bubbles. I can see Bill smiling; his bubble had burst a long time ago.

The questions that Styron had been asking himself since he was a child: it was Baldwin who finally gave him the answers.

JAMES

I went into the restaurant. I sat at a table. I waited. The waitress came. I can't say that she was aggressive or showed any disgust. She said to me: "We do not serve Negroes here, sir." I knew that. That's exactly why I went into the restaurant. There was a beer stein left on the table. I grabbed it and threw it at her. She ducked, or maybe I missed, who knows. The glass shattered against the mirror behind the bar. Thanks to some friends, I managed to get away. So, I left and headed to Paris. And I stayed. For years. I wasn't a "Negro" there. I was an "American," first and foremost. In any case, it's the Arabs, there, who are the "Negroes." Not much better, you'll tell me. And you'd be right of course. But the day when I threw a glass at the waitress's head, I knew that if I stayed in the United States, either I would eventually kill someone, or someone would kill me. Do you know what I mean?

Just like that, James went off to Paris. He had no money, he had nothing but a will to live. He later explained that at first he lived amongst the most destitute, and in those days, in Paris, the most destitute were Algerian.

He very quickly felt a sense of kinship with them. It didn't matter that he'd never laid eyes on "le bled" or that the Algerians had never set foot in Harlem. They were alike—brothers. James felt powerless to change the fate of the Arabs he'd lived alongside in Paris, but he knew that somehow his own fate was inextricably linked to theirs.

With no hope of changing their lot in any real way, he chose to write about it.

Fraternity, solidarity, and support, voiced in and through literature.

Excerpted from *Baldwin, Styron, and Me* (Biblioasis, 2025).

Two Poems

by stephanie roberts

UNMET

Let me tell you about my mourning
then you can tell me about tree planting.
It's that magic season
that hasn't reached you yet.
In shadowed corners
snow stays but already unjacketed
t-shirts breathe like geese like robins.
Monday quiet & empty streets
we will remember spring 2020
with all our suffering.
I had another dream that I was
the confidante of Beyoncé. I woke
under the ocean of it barely saving
myself. Espresso, pinky-tip of honey,
& wanting you beside me.
I was going to get at those taxes
to violate a fine day with drudgery,
but scratch true blue & bird-of-paradise
black. I woke to the picture of you, my lighthouse,
apple tree, ladder, smiling, a radiance like
answered prayer. Shine
in your remote location safe from mask & glove.
My father died yesterday & how on brand,
taking leave in the midst of disaster.
Beyoncé in gold mesh and cornrows, coiled
like a Zambian basket, put a soft hand
on mine. She thanked me and I tried
to pull away. *Oh no!* Something vibrates
in my throat & tears, *You!*
I flush under your sun.

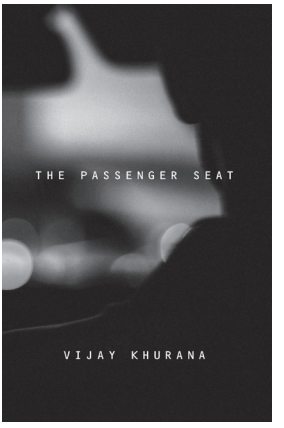
MALL OF THE SIRENS

Willows tremble, in from the road,
near water's lip,
where one would wish to be instead of here
dollar store, drumming in line, humming Hendrix,
holding fridge magnets, plastic daises you don't want,
a doodad you'd realize doesn't suit your frame
if you took a beat to let yourself
rise to your own amazement, which is beyond
the atrium's glass ceiling,
beyond the tang of loneliness
in the storm nestled at heart level.
This is what comes of taking dreams
off the horizon. It is the sun
or nothing else, you would scream
if you weren't caught up in the chorus.

An acorn folded its arms.
It desired death in black's riches.
This is also what you wanted
when you first got hold of it.
Chest-pocket-placed wishes grew overly precious
like a tongue covers decay in tooth. Desire, wish,
& will fought like tights in the laundry.
You jumped fences without losing breath.
You could keep the bow toward sunset.
Today felt like all the time in the world. Eyes to sky
small running start with a tree asleep
at your breast. Everything smooth is rose-toned
& false. It was the sun or nothing else
you mumble to nobody. Only sun.
Now you won't reach home. You never
reach home.

Excerpted from *UNMET* (Biblioasis, 2025).

An Interview with Vijay Khurana



L: *Vijay Khurana.* R: *Cover design by Zoe Norvell.*

VIJAY KHURANA is a writer and translator based between Berlin and London. He is currently completing a PhD in Creative and Critical Writing at Queen Mary, University of London. *The Passenger Seat*, his debut novel, is a 2025 American Booksellers' Association Indies Introduce and a March Indie Next pick and a *New York Times* Editors' Choice.

AHMED ABDALLA is a publicist at Biblioasis. He currently lives in Windsor.

AHMED ABDALLA: *Could you tell me a little about how this novel came about?*

VIJAY KHURANA: This book's genesis really came about when I was doing an MFA at the University of East Anglia. I noticed I was writing a lot of short stories about male friendships, and about the ways in which sexuality influences and shapes friendships among heterosexual young men and some of those stories included an aspect of violence, of young men dehumanizing those around them in various ways. I went from those short stories to looking at a larger piece of writing.

AA: I know it was partly influenced by true events. Could you speak about the relationship between fact and fiction and what made you want to write about this?

VK: There was an incident I read about in North America where two young men did a similar thing to what I was thinking about. I was influenced by that, but also by those short stories that I had been writing. The book takes a few cues and images from real events. There's a road trip aspect that is similar to some of the things I was reading about. There's an image in the novel of Teddy and Adam using a digital camera and being obsessed with this idea of filming and experiencing the world through that medium of recorded video. That's another thing that came from real events. Then the second part of the book is wholly fictional.

AA: Why did you decide to call it The Passenger Seat*?*

VK: It felt very much from early on that *The Passenger Seat* was the perfect title for this book. If you're in the passenger seat, you're not in control, and you're also potentially not responsible for what happens in that vehicle. There's this whole idea of passivity and abdication of responsibility that runs through the novel. There's this question between Teddy and Adam of which one of them is actually in control and which one of them is responsible for the things they end up doing. One of the things I'm really interested in is to get at the idea that the male friendship itself is part of some of the problems with violence and dehumanizing among young men. But I think by the end of the novel, I'd like the reader to ask this question about why it's called *The Passenger Seat* and what questions are there then about who was active and who was along for the ride. Who was culpable? And in what ways was everyone basically culpable?

AA: There is a sharp shift in the narrative from the Teddy and Adam story to the Ron and Freeman one, where the former story ends unexpectedly. Both sections seem to be about men who don't stop their friend from committing violence because of that idea of passivity and control. But one section is definitely much more violent than the other. How do you see these two sections as related and what are you trying to say by having them together in the novel?

VK: In some ways I'm interested in asking what is the difference between the men that society tends to look at as being "essentially good" despite their faults and other men that society might deem to be so beyond understanding and so monstrous that they really have nothing to teach us. That we, the rest of society, are so unlike them that there is no redeeming them and there's no sense that they might be able to teach us something about ourselves. The second part of the novel is exactly that and it does have an element of Ron reflecting on a specific moment where his friend was committing domestic violence. He is pretty sure it's happening, but he has sort of enough plausible deniability about the situation that he decided to not do anything about it. He asks himself about that and yet doesn't really come to any conclusions about his own responsibility. I'm definitely comparing those two friendships and the ways in which the performance of masculinity itself can lead men, through the guise of friendship, to do things that are not productive, helpful or good.

AA: What do you think it means to perform masculinity and what does it reveal about the men in the novel? I'm thinking about all the references to audience and being watched. They seem to think a lot about how they will be perceived and what kind of man they want to be thought of.

VK: In terms of trying to figure out what kind of man you are expected to be and what kind of man you might want to be when you are very young, it makes friendships you have with other young men really important. I think especially young men can only see themselves mediated through someone else. They can see themselves mediated through a friend, an enemy, through someone who's envious of them, disgusted at them, through someone who, in a public space, perceives them as being disrespectful or threatening or going against some sort of social etiquette. This is something that happens a lot in various ways that may not be as stark as the ways in which I depict these characters, but performing in order to get a reflected sense of oneself is really common.

It's also not just about performing masculinity as a way of understanding what kind of man you are, but it's also about performing masculinity in terms of playing a role that you could see as absolving you from the consequences of your actions. If you're just playing a

role or playing a game or seeing yourself as a story, then it becomes easier to go through life without a sense that your actions have real consequences for other people. Hence there's a lot of focus not just on that video camera, but also there's a specific video game that these two young men play, which I'm not using to say that video games make young men violent, but it's more that idea of mediation, of playing a role, of going through life as an avatar rather than as yourself.

And then also, the windshield itself, which I think has an interesting parallel with cinema. If you're on a road trip, you're looking through that windshield and everything you experience is mediated by the glass. You're in the world, but you're not really in the world, and that's something else I was getting at.

AA: That also makes me think of Adam's refrain of "fun and games" whenever they're together. It's like all their actions are supposed to be taken as playful. So it further blurs reality and gameplay. They're both in the world and not seriously in it.

VK: And I think it's also for him almost a defense mechanism at times. The way he feels he can get through life is to treat things as if they don't really matter, especially at the beginning. It seems like something that he says to himself in order to help him cope with things not necessarily being in his control or to pretend that he's okay with something that he finds challenging. But yes, game playing is absolutely a huge part of it. There's even a line when they first start using the rifle, a comparison to how really young children will share their toys with pride and reluctance. That idea of playing games, using toys, is a big part of going through life when you are scrambling to work out what life is and who you are in it.

AA: While Teddy and Adam are friends, a lot of their thoughts about each other seem to be comparing what the other has or lacks. Could you talk about the competitive aspect in male friendships and how this plays out in the novel?

VK: There's always this very fine line between play and competition. When something is played, it does not actually have an aim or a goal or an ambition. But once it becomes a game, then it might have rules,

a goal, a winner, a loser. I think that competition is obviously a big part of how many young men have a sense of themselves, as a winner or a loser or someone who is good at something or not. It's probably to some extent just human nature to contend with others, to want to best somebody at something, even something completely point-

Competition is obviously a big part of how many young men have a sense of themselves, as a winner or a loser.

less. In the novel there's a moment where they are perched on these fence posts beside a car park and they mess around for a while but then suddenly they are actually playing a game with a winner and a loser. They're trying to hop from one to the other as many times as they can without falling. Or later they end up playing a game where they're kicking an orange peel and trying to kick it as far as they can and further than the other one. Games for them are something they take refuge in as a language almost, as a way of communicating with each other, because they maybe lack more sophisticated ways of doing that. And of course they also take refuge in the idea of games once they have done something that is life-changingly tragic.

AA: Violence seems to be a threshold that Teddy and Adam are building up to pass. We see them in different situations getting a bit more violent either with their words or their actions, trying to one up each other. But once Teddy does shoot those two people, a scene that is very drawn out in the novel, their relationship changes and also the rest of the violence happens off the page. How does that level of violence change them and their friendship?

VK: One thing I was really conscious of with this novel is that I didn't want to just "get inside the head" of someone who would do something like that because that would be to some extent a fool's errand. But I think that I was trying to work out not just what these two characters would do after doing something extremely violent like that, but also what their relationship and the change in their relationship might say about other men or all men in general and how they would attempt to keep moving through space having done something like that.

They react in different ways. Teddy becomes increasingly passive and submissive almost as a way of dealing with what he's done.

Adam, for different reasons, tries to become much more dominant, while also at various times trying to treat what they did as a game, as something that didn't really matter, and he has his own background and ideas that help him towards that position. After it happens, their relationship changes in a few ways. But for me, they're both just hurtling towards the end of that section, which, if the reader doesn't know it at the time, is essentially their deaths.

AA: And why did you decide not to show the rest of their violent acts?

VK: There are a couple of reasons. I was a journalist for a while and I worked in radio and have always been quite interested in the way that the media turns tragedy like this into its own kind of consumable narrative. So one reason is that I wanted to write some part of the novel from the point of view of a voracious media cycle, which is in the book as we get towards the end of the first section.

Another thing is that it was very difficult to write all these things and to write these characters who are in many ways just really terrible people doing really terrible things. I didn't want to make the violence seem like page turning excitement. In order to avoid that, and in order to concentrate on the ideas behind what was happening rather than the violence itself, having had a scene which I think had to be there, I didn't want to then give more space on the page to violence that might just feel like it was for the sake of a narrative or anything like that.

Bookseller Buzz

"A plunge into a pitch-black abyss. Two boys shrug off the yoke of their teenage years and drive off into adulthood and all its violent uncertainty. Feels so real it may as well be a cursed memoir. Can't stop thinking about this book."

DOUGLAS RIGGS, BANK SQUARE BOOKS (MYSTIC, CT)

"A coming-of-age novel for TODAY—a shocking, poignant picture of despondency. Exceptional read."

SHELLEY LOWE, MONKEY AND DOG BOOKS (FORT WORTH, TX)

AA: What were you looking to say about how the media talks about male violence?

VK: One of my main thoughts when I first started writing this is just how often this kind of thing happens. It just happens over and over and over again, and what I mean by "it" is young men, not always together, but often together with other young men, doing violent things. There is this idea that the media is fundamentally interested in certain things. The main one being trying to appeal to a lot of consumers of that medium, so it's definitely going to create a narrative that suits its own aims and that combined with the fact that young men so often commit violent acts, I think that leads to quite an unnuanced depiction of some of these events. It's often kind of lazy and emotionally manipulative in a way that is maybe unproductive for asking the really important questions, which is why does this keep happening? Why do we not seem to be learning anything from these repeated things happening?

AA: I really enjoyed the rhythm of the book and how each sentence kind of flows nicely into the next as well as how the characters speak to each other and the language within their friendship. Could you speak about your style and how you decided to shape the novel?

VK: Some of it is the sort of slightly taciturn rhythms of communications between male teenagers. Some of it is the rhythm of the road trip. There are rhythms to being in a car and driving down a highway or a road. So some of that I wanted to get into the prose. I like books where each sentence has its own kind of drama or tension. Or it might have a pleasing aspect if there's some kind of alliteration in there or it might have a disharmonious or dissonant kind of quality as well. And the pace of a sentence also matters. The sounds of that sentence can reflect somebody's state of mind or an action or the passing of time and how people's experience of the passing of time is happening. There's a whole lot of stuff that I really enjoy doing with a sentence.

AA: Road trips in stories are usually associated with a desire to find something or change yourself, often a coming-of-age story. And this novel is

kind of a coming-of-age story, just in a much darker sense. Do you have any thoughts about that?

VK: I'm really interested in the paradoxes of the road trip. It tends to be about coming of age and becoming an adult to some extent. But at the same time, the road trip is so much about not actually engaging seriously and responsibly with the world around you, which we could understand to be a big part of adulthood. The very fact of just passing through different towns without properly stopping or engaging with them is like an abdication of adulthood.

I knew early on that I didn't want their road trip to have a serious or specific goal. It sort of has these different goals but neither Teddy nor Adam properly commits to any of them. Adam has this idea that he might just leave home and never go back. He has this idea of maybe going and getting a job in a mine and completely leaving his old life behind. But you can tell that it's still a childhood fantasy rather than actual ambition. There's also that idea of running to something versus running from something and a lot of road trip narratives are a combination of both.

A road trip is about being completely free and wide open spaces, but it's also about the utter claustrophobia of being stuck in a really small space often with someone else. It's also about forcing a relationship to change under conditions of tiredness, or boredom, or whatever else. I also thought back to the road trips I took when I was around Teddy and Adam's age. I thought a lot about the ways in which my friendships and relationships were impacted by those trips and some of the feelings of just what it was like to be in a vehicle. And I knew that the road trip was definitely what I wanted to use to explore those ideas about masculinity and violence.

AA: We usually learn to be adults by watching our parents, but, for different reasons, both Teddy and Adam reject their fathers as figures to aspire to. Where do you think they get their ideas of masculinity and how does this affect them?

VK: One of things I really wanted to avoid doing was telling a kind of trauma narrative where somebody does something terrible to somebody else and then you learn that they had had something

terrible done to them. I didn't want to tell a story where two young men don't have father figures and therefore their manhood becomes twisted in such a way that it becomes polluted. But at the same time, they do both essentially turn away from their fathers. I wanted to get beyond the father figure, which is maybe the most obvious masculine example. I was more interested in getting at the many other examples that men see and emulate, including the male friend. I didn't want to weigh things too heavily towards the idea of the father-son dynamic because that would have weighted the book in a very specific way. In fact, the idea of fatherhood is most present in the second section, when we find out that Ron has this fantasy that he could have been a stepfather if things had turned out differently, whereas in fact Ron never actually had the courage to commit to that role when he had the chance. It was kind of a game for him, too.

AA: What are you hoping people take away from reading this novel?

VK: I think I want them to read it again. I want them to feel like there might be undercurrents and links and things that a reader might not necessarily pick up on first read. Little ties between different characters, recurring images and things like that. And also that the experience of reading the prose will be a pleasurable one. I'm of two minds about saying "pleasurable" because the book is really not necessarily a pleasurable book. It's about some quite disturbing stuff. But having said that, the idea of reading sentences and finding them to be in some way aesthetically interesting, is always part of reading, at least for me.

Also, I hope I am asking some interesting and difficult questions that the reader will be left saddled with after they've finished this book. I didn't want to write a book where the problems that the book raises get resolved by the end. I wanted to write a book where people have to walk away holding all of that stuff in their head, holding those questions, juxtapositions and paradoxes. I hope readers might walk away asking some questions about the connections between friendship and violence and how men perform their masculinity in ways that often see them avoiding responsibility.

20 Stores —for— 20 Years

Celebrating our recent birthday with twenty of our favourite independent bookshops.

This is the first book that demonstrated to me the power of handselling, and by extension, of bookselling. (For those not familiar with one of the dorkiest vernaculars to exist, I will briefly define handselling as the act of promoting books by personal recommendation, as opposed to publisher marketing. Biblioasis made a chapbook celebrating this fine art in commemoration of Indie Bookstore Day last year.) Plus, I'm from Ohio, so there's some pleasure of autobiographical relation here, too (the whole thing is narrated by a woman in Ohio). I haven't read the whole thing—are you kidding?—but this book is extremely important to me because it's one of the first books I remember watching Kyle sell during my first season at Type. He sold it in a characteristically weird way: he'd say the title, with forceful articulation behind both words, but full seconds would lapse between them. The sonic emphasis was on absence: "*Ducks . . . Newburyport.*" That's pretty much all he needed to do to sell the book. It was bonkers, it was a magic trick, and I watched him do it over and over again. Our Queen West store—or Kyle, using two words—sold 118 copies of a thousand-page book made of eight sentences.

CLAIRE FOSTER (WITH KYLE BUCKLEY!),
TYPE BOOKS (TORONTO, ON)

Under Pressure

Mark Bourrie on writing RIPPER: The Making of Pierre Poilievre

Mark Bourrie launching Crosses in the Sky *at Biblioasis Bookshop, shortly before he relapsed again into nonfiction writing and started work on the political biography* Ripper: The Making of Pierre Poilievre.

WRITING BOOKS IS a bad habit that I've wanted to break for a long time. I started doing it just after I quit smoking. Authors chase their own kinds of dragons. The next book always seems like such a good idea. Then it comes out into a world where your countrymen, patriots all now, camp out overnight to buy American thrillers and tell you on social media that they're certainly not going to buy your book. The subject is too unpleasant.

You learn to live with that. After all, your idea for that next book is a "can't miss." And that's in normal times. Which these aren't.

Last May, Dan Wells and I sat down together on a lovely spring day on the patio of a coffee shop in Walkerville, the best part of Windsor. I was in town to launch *Crosses in the Sky: Jean de Brébeuf and the Destruction of Huronia*, a biography of a mystic missionary priest that's really an account of how European–Indigenous relations were toxic from the start.

The geography of this story is important. We were an easy walk from Detroit. My grandparents met in that city. I've got cousins all over Michigan. There's a statue of Lewis Cass, my first cousin eight times removed, downtown. (He was Michigan's governor and

the first Democratic Party nominee to fail to win a presidential election). Windsor is Detroit's southern suburb. It's a place that is neither fully in Canada or the States.

It seemed clear to me that the story arc of 2024 was the return of Donald Trump. Not only was he coming back, but the Constitution bound him to just one term. Electoral politics would not be a factor in White House decisions.

In Canada, the prime minister had stayed too long, as they usually do. Conventional wisdom said Pierre Poilievre, the nerd equivalent of a hockey goon, couldn't possibly lose. It wasn't just Poilievre's campaign skills—admittedly, the best we've seen in modern memory—but also the new media environment that gave him the advantage. Toxic media in a toxic time.

And, I yammered at Dan after my eighth or ninth coffee of the day, Canada—at least at the federal level—was one of the last Western countries to resist the movement fronted by Trump, Putin, Orban, Wilders, Farage, Le Pen and the rest. In 2014, I'd written a book about Stephen Harper's information control and manipulation. In many ways, Harper was a scout for Trump's movement, which still does not have a decent name. Now, it seemed, we were going to endure a more extreme, vindictive regime, verging on fascism. A sort of Fascism Lite.

So let's do a book, I said to Dan, even though I was already on the road trying to keep *Crosses in the Sky* on the Canadian best-seller lists and was (am) convinced that writing non-fiction books is the worst thing to do with my time. Summer was coming. I had an old sailboat in the water and a second home, a 180-year-old farmhouse in Quebec, that needed renovation. I'd just come off a brutal defamation trial, representing a former porn star who was being sued for #MeToo posts about her ex. Part of the trial turned on whether he deliberately harmed the women in his life with his massive penis.

Let's leap ahead. Sometime in August, about noon on one of those 30-degree, 90 percent humidity days that are surprisingly common in Ottawa, I got a call from the marina. My boat, the caller said, was doing something weird. When I got to the dock, I saw that my 26-foot sailboat was very low in the water. Inside was 18 inches of Ottawa River that needed to be hand-bailed.

I hadn't been to the boat in six weeks. The water came from a leak in the toilet water intake line, no more than mist, really. At home, I had maybe 75,000 words of my 40,000–60,000 word book drafted, and a wife adjusting to life with a newly broken ankle.

The prime minister had stayed too long, as they usually do. Conventional wisdom said Pierre Poilievre, the nerd equivalent of a hockey goon, couldn't possible lose.

A few weeks later, I was back, scrubbing the inside of the boat, feeling guilty about stealing time from the book. At the end of the day, I hooked up a borrowed pressure washer, something I'd never used before, and swiped the side of the boat. It was a life-changing experience, the most fun I had all summer. The pressure washer that I got for Christmas sits in a box in the shed.

All of this happened when Dan and the Biblioasis folks were running on a schedule based on the idea that we'd have an election in October 2025, the "fixed" date. But, while it's arguable that Canada is not broken, our election dates certainly are not fixed. I still had the manuscript—now pushing over 100,000 words—when Trump was re-elected. I gave it to Dan at the beginning of December.

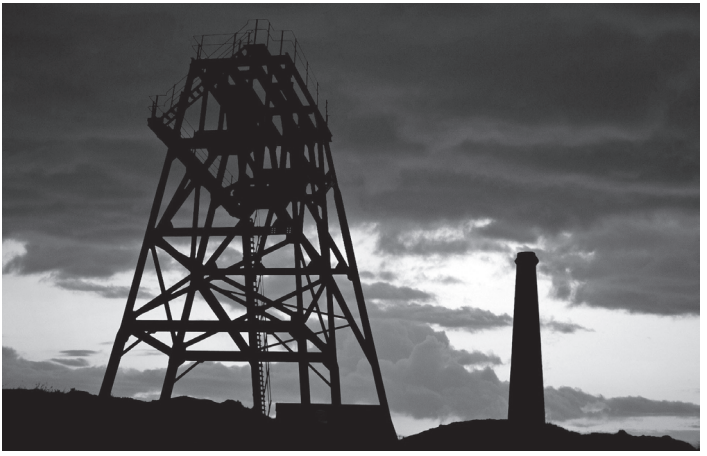
But events . . . Trump had noticed Canada and was ruminating about annexation. Chrystia Freeland pulled a caucus coup. It was clear we'd have an election before the fall.

Everyone worked their asses off. Everyone came through on this book. The editors, the cover artist, the printers, the bookstores all did things in weeks that they usually need months for. We got *Ripper: The Making of Pierre Poilievre* into stores the third week of March. And, frankly, it's a better book than I thought it would be.

Now, I just need to cope with two things: my car, which may or may not have a broken transmission; and the knowledge, imparted to me last night by a Cate Blanchett video on YouTube, that "ripper" has a meaning in Australia that was previously unknown to me. The Law of Sheer Perversion, which runs my life, has a very weird sense of humour.

The New Rome

An excerpt from ON OIL by Don Gillmor



THE MONEY WAS in oil, but you had to know someone. New to the city, I didn't know anyone, but I was looking for a summer job in the oil fields, so a friend and I drove east from Calgary in a rented Ford Maverick, looking for derricks outside Medicine Hat. "The town that was born lucky," in Rudyard Kipling's 1908 assessment, sat on a massive gas field covering 313,631 hectares, holding almost two billion cubic feet of natural gas. "All Hell for a basement," in Kipling's words. The gas was contained in sandstone from the Upper Cretaceous, some of it only 450 metres below the surface, easily accessible.

The first rig we stopped at had a sign that read "This rig has worked 0 accident-free days." A man in his twenties sat on a forty-gallon drum, head down, hand wrapped in gauze, blood staining his jeans. So, a job opening. But we didn't have any experience and the driller said he had no use for us.

We spent four days driving out to rigs in the 32°C July heat before we found one that would take us. A crew hadn't shown up for their afternoon shift and the driller looked at my friend and me, our longish hair, and said, "I guess you girls'll have to do."

The driller's name was Joe, an angry man in his mid-forties with a furrowed face that came to a point, like a villain in a children's book. I wrestled with the nine-metre drill pipe in the late afternoon heat, sliding on the slick steel floor, losing my hard hat, Joe

screaming curses that disappeared in the noise of the engines. Black diesel smoke drifted toward us. The work was exhausting and confusing and there wasn't a lunch break. It was still light at 9 p.m., but dark storm clouds were moving in from the west. The air cooled within minutes and the rain arrived like an artillery attack, bouncing off the steel rig. I assumed we would go inside and wait it out, but we kept working, soaked through and chilled to the bone.

At midnight, the graveyard shift failed to arrive. The day-shift driller lived in a trailer parked near the rig and Joe sent me over to wake him. I hammered on the padded door and a man finally opened it angrily, scratching and blinking. He was in his late forties, with black hair and rockabilly sideburns. I told him we needed an extra hand and he turned away, swearing. In the kitchen, a pale girl my age leaned against the counter. She was wearing a man's shirt, her legs the colour of skim milk, her face puffy with sleep, blinking opaquely. There was an empty bottle of Black Velvet whisky on the table. The day driller came out, swearing at me, the rain, at God, at the missing graveyard shift. We worked without stopping, pulling the pipe out of the ground, changing the worn-out drill bit, then running the pipe back down. The noise of the engines and the barrage of rain bouncing off the steel made it impossible to talk, a mercy. The rain finally stopped and a lurid red sunrise brought some warmth.

MY FRIEND QUIT after a month, but I stayed. The work was dirty and dangerous, but the money was good, and it was a colourful subculture, which had a lot of appeal for an English major. And it was a way to measure myself, the young man's rite of passage, stepping into a foreign, unforgiving world. It represented some kind of freedom, though it was hard to say what kind.

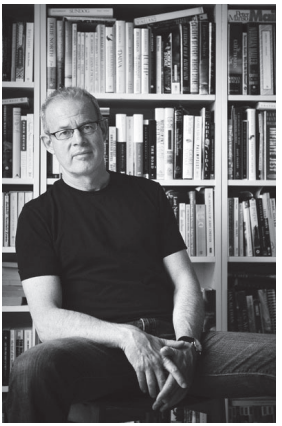
Joe was recently divorced, his teenage daughter a runaway. He lived out of his truck, drunk by noon, out of his mind. He would stand over the wellhead smoking under the emphatic No Smoking! sign, telling me for the fifteenth time that people went to university to get stupider. When a safety inspector came out, the only time I ever saw one in the oil patch, he examined the cigarette butts littered across the drilling floor. "You're drilling for gas, you goddamn doorknob," he yelled, his face inches from Joe's. "You think there might be a connection?" He threatened to fine every

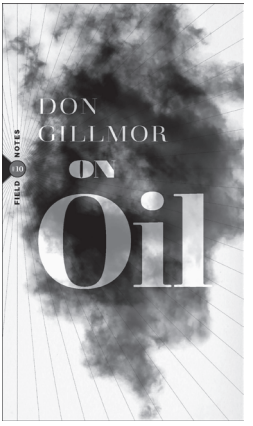
man on the rig $500 and the drilling company $2,500. While he was there, I accidentally started a small grass fire while trying to fix the backup generator, which chronically misfired and was a mechanical mystery to me. Sparks flew out and ignited the dry scrub, and the crew, along with the safety inspector, ran around the prairie with wet sacks, trying to put it out. "This is really something," the inspector said. "This just about takes the blue ribbon." After he drove off, Joe lit up a Player's Plain and said, "I may have to educate that son of a bitch with a two-foot pipe wrench."

We drilled in the Palliser Triangle, a large area of southeastern Alberta that contains arid semi-desert with small cacti and rattlesnakes, as well as irrigated farmers' fields. The farmers welcomed the extra income but resented our presence, loud, unceasing, and messy. We drilled in a farmer's canola crop and Joe got in his truck and flattened everything within the lease boundary out of spite and the farmer came out with a rifle and fired three shots at the rig.

An itinerant petroleum engineer occasionally came out to the well site. He drove a Mercury Marquis and drank from a hip flask, a big man who swaggered and barked orders. Driving home through the semi-desert at midnight, Joe and I saw his car parked at an angle about ten metres off the road. The driver's door was open and the engineer was slumped in his seat. Joe stopped the truck and said, "I'd better go see if that dizzy prick is all right." He walked over and stuck his head in the door, then took the keys out of the ignition and threw them into the darkness. He walked back to the truck and said, "Passed out. Maybe we can move the rig before he wakes up."

On a graveyard shift, Joe gave me a hockey stick with a rag soaked in kerosene at the end, then lit it and told me to go to the end of the pipe where gas was escaping. I inched the flaming stick near the pipe and it exploded into flame, lighting up the prairie night with benzene, xylene, carbon dioxide, and dioxins. On the way back, I drove his truck so he could shoot at rattlesnakes with the .22 he kept on a gun rack. They were out in the morning sun, absorbing heat from the black asphalt. He drank beer, tossing the empties out the window and checking the rear-view mirror to see them smash on the road. We ate breakfast at the restaurant in the Husky gas station on the highway, and as we left, Joe yelled, "We already done our eight hours."





L: *Don Gillmor (cr. Ryan Szulc).* R: *Series design by Ingrid Paulson.*

I was staying in the Corona Hotel in Medicine Hat, a cheap flophouse with a shared bathroom on every floor. On the sidewalk outside the Corona there was glass and blood, evidence of the previous night's fights. Rig workers only got one night off every three weeks, and they crowded all their anger and longing into that Saturday night. The hotel was filled with roughnecks and defeated middle-aged men at the end of something. A prostitute stalked the hallway, a tired woman in her forties in a faded print dress and cowboy boots. She smiled at me, missing a front tooth, and asked if I wanted a date.

In September, I told Joe I was heading back to university. "I don't imagine you'll be too hard to replace," he said.

I RETURNED TO the rigs each summer, working for different outfits, drilling south of Calgary, east near Brooks and Medicine Hat, north around Grande Prairie. The money was more than I could make anywhere else, and I was part of the provincial zeitgeist. Thirty thousand people moved to Calgary each year, drawn to oil. There was a palpable sense of power, of being at the centre of something.

My fellow roughnecks were ex-cons, failed farmers, a British alcoholic who fell into a sump pit filled with drilling mud, and a few students, one of whom quit halfway through the first shift and walked twenty kilometres back to town. There was a short, muscular derrickman who had a dent in his forehead from a pool ball thrown by a woman in a Grande Prairie bar, and an eighteen-year-old who drove a pink Cadillac and worshipped Elvis.

Forty kilometres northwest of Medicine Hat was the British Army Training Unit Suffield, a vast training facility for British soldiers. It was big enough (2,700 square kilometres) that it was used for live firing. The rig I was working on was the first to drill on what was called the British Block. I would see British soldiers walking into town, dressed like an Elton John album cover, looking for romance. Most evenings ended with fights with locals in the bar parking lot, but they kept returning, like salmon swimming upstream, slaves to nature.

On our first graveyard shift, we heard a shell land somewhere in the distance. The sky flared briefly. The next one was closer, a third shell closer still. The driller handed me his truck keys and told me to find out where the hell they were firing from. "Tell those limey fucks they break it they bought it."

I rattled along the gravel roads as fast as I could, heading toward the buildings we had seen on our way in. I got out and told a soldier I needed to speak to his commanding officer, that it was life and death, a wartime trill moving through me. The soldier was my age, half a world from home, half asleep. The commanding officer had a clipped military moustache. I told him we were drilling for gas out there and his shells were getting very close.

"Drilling for gas?" he said. "And you are?"

"A roughneck on that rig."

"A rough neck," he said, emphasizing the second syllable. "I see."

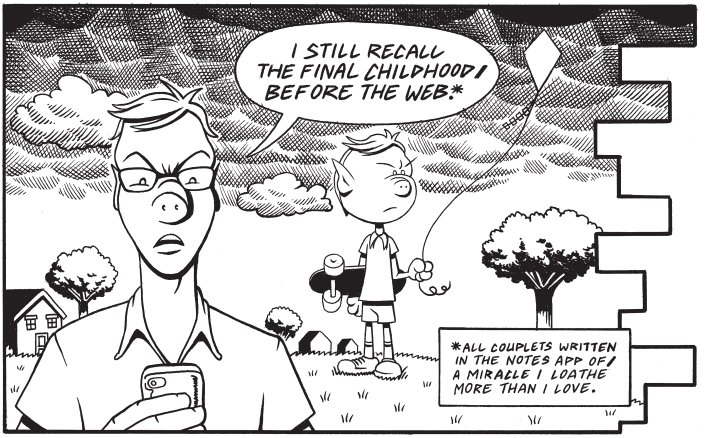
He gave an order to someone who communicated it to whoever was firing the shells and I drove back to the rig as slowly as possible.

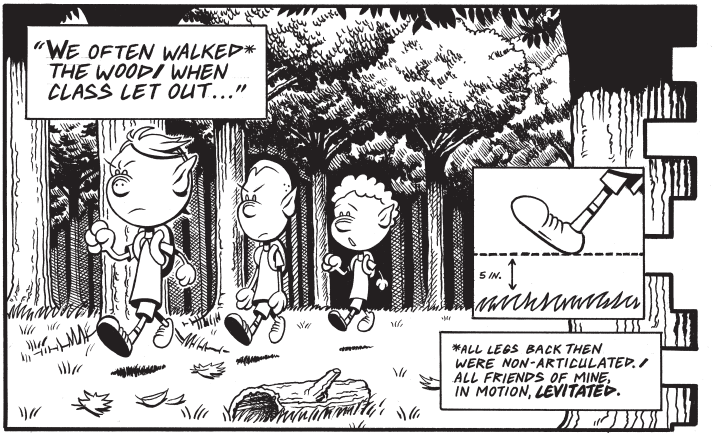
GRAVEYARD SHIFTS WERE best, the sky an expressive dome, the air finally cool. On slow drilling nights, I'd walk away from the rig's relentless noise and smoke a cigarette out on the prairie and stare at the night sky. Ovid said that all other creatures look down toward the earth, but man was given a face so that he might turn his eyes toward the stars. The morning would break, pink clouds in the east, the warmth spreading slowly.

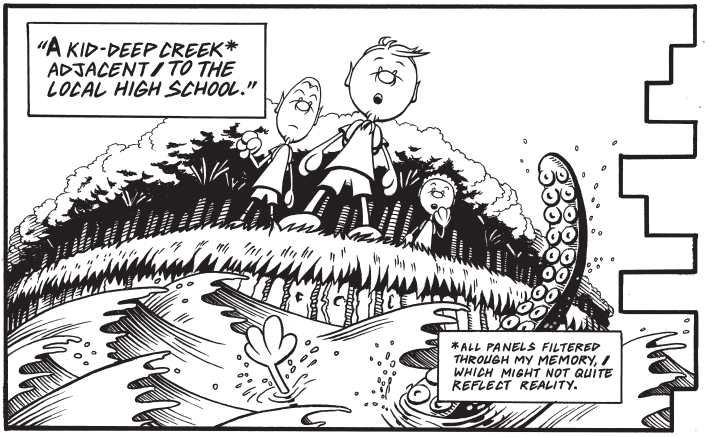
In August, my hand was crushed by the breakout tongs on a midnight shift and I was driven to the hospital in Medicine Hat. There wasn't a doctor on duty and so the night nurse called him.

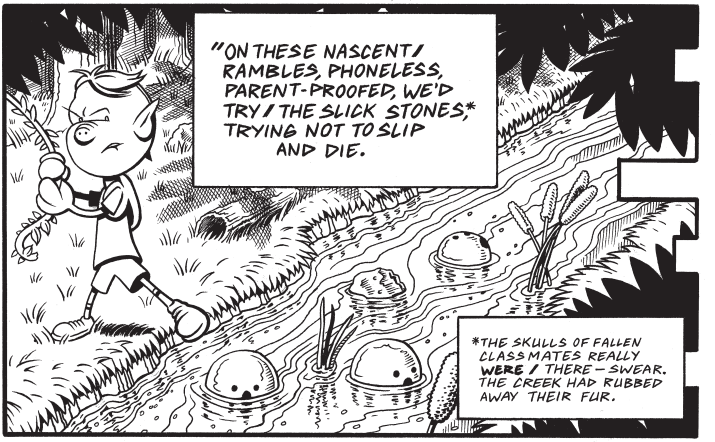
He arrived cinematically drunk, staggering and slurring like Dudley Moore in Arthur. He told me to wash my hand in the sink and shakily poured half a bottle of Aspirin into my good hand, most of them ending up on the floor. Four days later I was on a Greyhound bus to Calgary with an infected hand that looked like an oven mitt. But my hand healed and I returned to the oil fields every summer. I bought an unreliable eight-year-old Ford Econoline van and listened to sad country songs on the radio and danced with big-haired waitresses, and every September I went back to university with a swollen bank account and tales of oil patch madness. Oil had captured the civic psyche and infected my world. It offered, more than anything else, a sense of possibility. Here was the New Rome.

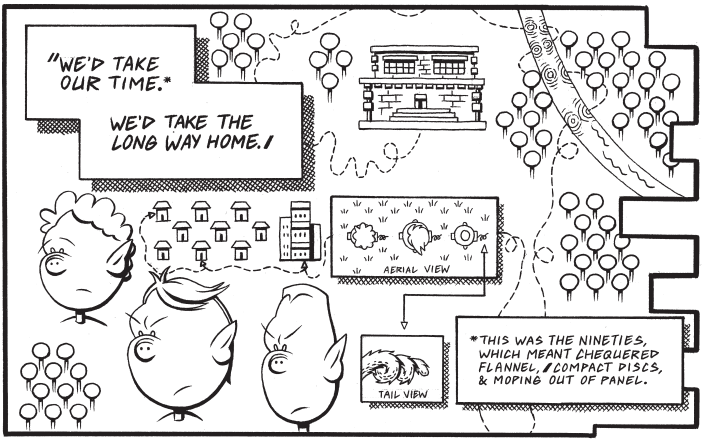
Excerpted from *On Oil* (Biblioasis, 2025).


I STILL RECALL
THE FINAL CHILDHOOD /
BEFORE THE WEB.*
*ALL COUPLETS WRITTEN IN THE NOTES APP OF / A MIRACLE I LOATHE MORE THAN I LOVE.


"WE OFTEN WALKED* THE WOOD / WHEN CLASS LET OUT..."
5 IN.
*ALL LEGS BACK THEN WERE NON-ARTICULATED. / ALL FRIENDS OF MINE, IN MOTION, LEVITATED.


"A KID-DEEP CREEK* ADJACENT / TO THE LOCAL HIGH SCHOOL."
*ALL PANELS FILTERED THROUGH MY MEMORY, / WHICH MIGHT NOT QUITE REFLECT REALITY.


"ON THESE NASCENT/ RAMBLES, PHONELESS, PARENT-PROOFED, WE'D TRY/ THE SLICK STONES,* TRYING NOT TO SLIP AND DIE.
*THE SKULLS OF FALLEN CLASSMATES REALLY WERE/ THERE—SWEAR. THE CREEK HAD RUBBED AWAY THEIR FUR.


"WE'D TAKE OUR TIME.*
WE'D TAKE THE LONG WAY HOME./
AERIAL VIEW
TAIL VIEW
*THIS WAS THE NINETIES, WHICH MEANT CHEQUERED FLANNEL,/ COMPACT DISCS, & MOPING OUT OF PANEL.


WE'D DO THE THING OUR PHONES DO NOW:
WE'D ROAM.

What the Critics Are Saying

Alice Chadwick's DARK LIKE UNDER

"*Dark Like Under* is impressively subtle, sensual and sympathetic. For the reader, it is a day well spent."

THE GUARDIAN

"This hypnotically written debut unfolds over a single day at a secondary school in the Eighties. A group of pupils are left reeling when they learn of the sudden death of a beloved teacher, tragic news that only exacerbates the tensions in the teenagers' fraught friendships and tentative romantic relationships. It's the sort of haunting novel that sticks in your mind long after you've put it down."

THE INDEPENDENT

"An unpretentiously elegiac novel, [*Dark Like Under*] hymns nature's solace and the power of human connection with memorable grace."

DAILY MAIL

[Chadwick's] descriptive powers are remarkable . . . The period details are wonderfully accurate . . . But Chadwick is not just good at surfaces: she is also capable of brilliant characterization."

TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

"A slow and absorbing piece of literary fiction . . . Chadwick's prose is delicate, precise and not without a little humour . . . Just lovely."

MARIE CLAIRE UK

"Even in the face of tragedy, for those in the heady days of late adolescence, lessons go on, friendships falter and flirtations simmer, as Chadwick shows in her unique, evocative take on the coming-of-age novel."

VOGUE UK

My Success

A short story from OLD ROMANTICS by Maggie Armstrong

THE JOB WAS quickly organised by my father so I could repay the money I had borrowed for my travels and debaucheries. I had never done much photocopying or sat at a computer. I still hadn't thought of death or madness. I'd never felt the rabid terror of my obsolescence drawing nearer every day. I was willing to be helpful somewhere.

The hours were 8am to 4pm and I should wear black and white, they said. The bus number to the financial district was 122. I'd be on the seventh floor.

On day one, a man with papery skin and smiling eyes led me through the foyer to the elevator, saying, 'Good morning, now I'm George the catering manager and I'll bring you up to the girls.'

Maybe by now I had been told I was going to be making tea. You see the country was rich, and the firm was making so much money, the office was already magnificently overstaffed. But they had to find something for me to do.

The elevator doors split open, and we talked about university. George had a great love of books. 'Ah, I must have read every book under the sun, every book under the sun,' he said, shaking his head fondly. He carried a mop and bucket in one hand, a walkie-talkie in the other. We reached floor seven.

Five or six or eight women in stiff outfits were shuttling round with trays; one by one, they waved, and nodded, and disappeared, and reappeared.

'Bernie, Roz, Dolores, Mona, Geraldine.' Or was it Jacqueline. George was introducing me to people who weren't there. 'And Ray over there, that's Ray.' The chef wore a striped apron, and he stood against a wall, holding a telephone with a spiral cord, writing something in a book. He glared at me.

We passed a cleaning lady, though she had no name. Nobody told me her name. She wore a purple smock, and looked away.

'Testing, testing, coming in from Mars,' George said, and he handed me a walkie-talkie. 'Seven floors, eighteen meeting rooms, four-hundred-forty-six staff. We'll need to be able to reach each

other. So that's you darlin'. Over and out!' He left with a wave. I stood in the corridor and the women darted around, stacking teacups onto rows and rows of saucers, pushing trollies away.

One of the neat women was cutting the plastic coating off a Jacob's biscuit tin with a pair of scissors. 'What can I do to help?' I asked her. Maybe it was Bernie. She pulled off the lid, then reached underneath the trolley for another tin.

'Let me see now love,' she said, considering me a moment. 'I'll tell you what you could do is just leave us at it. Head off and have a break.'

She marched away, and I went down the corridor into the toilets, locked myself inside. But I could so easily be found, so I took the elevator to the fifth floor and locked myself into a different cubicle. I shut my eyes. Half an hour passed.

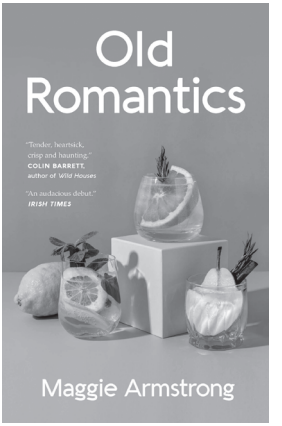
The next day, at the same time, I went down to the toilets, as I was very tired from the night before. My head was a kaleidoscope of gorgeous carnal visions that I wanted to return to. I folded up tight on the cubicle floor and took out my diary, in case I might write some of them down. But they were too enjoyable. I thought of nice things until sleep overcame me.

Every day, the tea girls opened up the building and set up the breakfast meetings. They worked from 7am to 4pm then finished up and went home to their husbands, and their children and grandchildren, in the cottages and council flats around the Docklands.

But in the middle of all this, when lunch was done, they sat and had a break together. Bernie's husband might have won some money on the dogs. They talked about the greyhound fixtures. Lotto numbers. Weight Watchers points. Fifteen points, twenty-five points. They spread low-point snacks around the table and as they ate each rice cracker or blueberry, they totted up the points.

September arrived, and the elevator down to the toilets got busy with the partners returning from their holidays. You had to look up and say hello more often. The numbers for the teas and coffees rose, and sometimes there was a trolley that you had to push.

They let me fill the boilers for the tea and coffee, and bring refills into the boardroom, where my father's slight frame was crumpling in a meeting lasting hours, a cold cup of coffee marbling at his elbow.



L: *Maggie Armstrong (cr. Brid O'Donovan).* R: *Cover design by Fiachra McCarthy.*

I planted the replenished flasks on the sidetable, smiled at my father across a row of dark suits—we twinkled for a moment at each other.

I still had so much to learn about helping people inconspicuously. It was in that blue-chip firm I was taught never to carry a glass into a lawyer with my bare hands—the glass must be placed first on a folded napkin, then on a plate, then on a tray, maybe lest it be finger-printed and besmirched with human touch.

The biscuits and refreshments were laid out, and I took the elevator down to five, retired to my cubicle, to curl up and think about the good times I'd endured the night before.

You couldn't just spend all your time in bathrooms, so once an hour or so had passed, I'd go back upstairs to continue to place saucers onto trays and coffee cups on saucers upside down in stackable rows. Then we would sit down at the small table along the corridor facing the kitchen, sky turning dusky through a window on the other side, and have a break.

Pink Lady apples, matchbox sized low-fat cheeses, packets of Lite Crackers. Fifteen points, thirty-five points. They talked quietly about Roz's son who had no intention of going back to school when term began, nor could he be forced. One time, Bernie told me her husband was laid off yesterday. 'Laid off?' I said.

Roz regarded me with exasperation. She explained. 'They let him go.'

I still wasn't sure I understood.

'He won't be going into work tomorrow,' Roz said, and Bernie nodded quickly, with a grim stare. She sliced an apple into halves, then quarters. Bernie and her husband had four children.

We finished tea, cleaned up the tea and then returned to the laying out of Bourbon Creams in a fan shape on a doily. The cleaning lady in the purple smock came in, and Roz led her around the kitchen with Ray standing with crossed arms, and showed her all the places she had not been cleaning properly—'And we said it to you before,' Roz told the cleaning lady with no name. She pointed in behind the gadgets and equipment, into the back of cupboards, and the cleaning lady hunched her shoulders, nodding, looking straight ahead of her.

I was on the biscuits. The lids popped open, and I spread the biscuits out and left them on the plates to grow a little stale, or to be eaten, in handfuls, by the young bloods in the boardrooms having sugar lows, or tipped into industrial bins, that or something else.

And I went back down to lock myself into a cubicle and cover my face and wait for everything to go back to being great. And returned to the soft pornography of recent memory.

I blackened out the day, replaying ecstatic visions of the night before. Wild thoughts. Delicious feelings.

Nobody asked questions. George would have understood. A dreamy man, he was okay about the shirking of a duty that did not exist. I was tired and poisoned from the late nights and it was in the bathrooms getting well again that I best served any organisation. I closed my eyes. In came the surge of bliss, wild feeling.

Except for a strange sound, on the day I'm thinking about.

A muffled sound was trembling from my bag. I didn't, at first, believe it could be coming from my bag, but my bag was ringing. I looked in. The screen flashed with a number on the walkie-talkie.

The dread that it was me that someone wanted overpowered every febrile thought.

I pressed at hard round coloured buttons.

'Hello? Hello?'

'Howya Margaret.'

It was George. He was talking quickly, out of breath.

'Sorry for bothering you but I've a Mr O'Mahony down on the third floor. Are they all gone home, Bernie, Roz, Geraldine, Mona?'

I checked the time; after four o'clock.

'I don't know, I'll try and catch them.'

'OK. It's only that we have a man down there, a Mr O'Mahony, a client, he's come up from Cork and he hasn't eaten anything all day. Do we have a plate we could warm up?'

'A plate?'

'A plate of food like. Had they done a roast pork at lunch?'

'I don't know. I think so, yes.'

'Good because we're going to need to give him something for his lunch.'

'OK, we'll look after him.' Bernie and Roz, Geraldine, Mona, Dolores and myself, we would all look after him.

I unlocked the door and rearranged my shirt collar in the bathroom mirror. You had to look so smart in this environment.

On the seventh floor, I found them, putting on their coats to leave. Mona, Bernie, Roz, though not Dolores, they didn't really like Dolores—she was always leaving early. All the girls were setting off for home as I tried to articulate what George told me—a Mr O'Mahony was down there. He'd driven up from Cork. Hadn't eaten anything all day apparently. Had they done a roast pork at lunch, and could we warm some up for him?

They understood immediately. Geraldine bounced past. Mona unwrapped cling film from a tray she lifted out of the fridge, and found the meat—ducking underneath her, Roz found the balls of mash and vegetables in their sealed containers. Bernie switched back on the water for the tea, got the milk jug and the sugar out.

Mona was wrapping cutlery in a serviette. The microwave rang. Roz got to it first, and the sweet-smelling slices of roast pork, the mash and vegetables were ready, piping hot, the meal placed under a cloche, and onto a tray, and onto a trolley, with the water jug and on the bottom shelf of the trolley, the tea things, and just when I thought we must have everything, Bernie ran towards us with a strawberry trifle.

With Roz, or Bernie, whichever it was, I jangled it all down the corridor and pressed the elevator to the third floor. With every second, I knew, the plate was cooling underneath the cloche but the elevator flew straight down, it stopped for no one and delivered us to three. Bernie, Roz—it doesn't matter does it, who

it was—she looked straight in front of her. I went behind Bernie, behind Roz, who had the trolley now and as she pushed it down the hallway, we didn't say a word because we knew we would make it, just in time, to Mr O'Mahony.

At the secretary's booth, my father passed me with his briefcase, and a rueful smile my way, both of us too busy to stop. I'd have to wait until another time to tell him all of this.

The secretary nodded, stood out, opened the boardroom door—or she wasn't there at all, we were doing this alone—we pushed on through, and found him right there sitting with the window at his back and a spectacular view of the coursing river and the rooftops and steeples of the north city beyond—Mr O'Mahony.

He was large-chested, with a foggy head of grey, a timid glisten in his eyes. He smiled, revealing an uneven cluster of yellow teeth. Roz was right there serving him a glass of water. Bernie might have been there quietly placing cutlery on the table, or maybe it was Mona—it doesn't matter. More important is that Mr O'Mahony, he'd come all the way from Cork and he hadn't had a thing to eat all day.

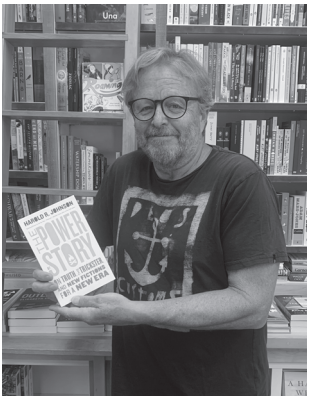
I laid the tray in front of Mr O'Mahony, who took all of us in with the most shattered face of gratitude.

Did he have everything he needed, asked Bernie, or she didn't ask, she was already gone—she was on the bus home, with dread inside her stomach because her husband wasn't going to work tomorrow. Bernie, Roz, Geraldine, Mona, Dolores—let's forget about all them.

Most important, loud and pounding in its urgency was that Mr O'Mahony had driven up from Cork that morning and he hadn't had a thing to eat all day. That was what we had to deal with, without any warning.

Mr O'Mahony was a big man, an appreciative man. He tucked his napkin in his shirt collar, and he closed his hands together for a moment's grace. He lifted the steamy silver cloche, discarded it on a chair, and sliced quickly at his luncheon. Hadn't had a thing to eat all day.

Excerpted from *Old Romantics* (Biblioasis, 2025)



20 Stores —for— 20 Years

Celebrating our recent birthday with twenty of our favourite independent bookshops.

Oh how I wish Harold R. Johnson hadn't left us so early, how I wish I could be in conversation with him again, maybe this time around a campfire. Luckily, Harold bequeathed us *The Power of Story*, a campfire inspired meditation whose subtitle says it all: *On Truth, the Trickster, and New Fictions for a New Era*. It is first among many brilliant Biblioasis books that we carry at Upstart & Crow. To share it with others is a small but important way of keeping the conversation going. We miss you, Harold.

IAN GILL, UPSTART & CROW (VANCOUVER, BC)

The Bibliophile

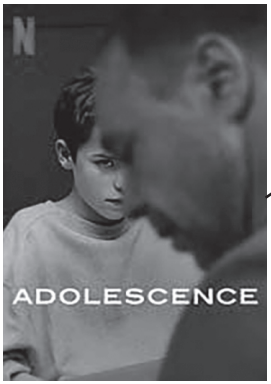
NEWS FROM THE BIBLIOMANSE

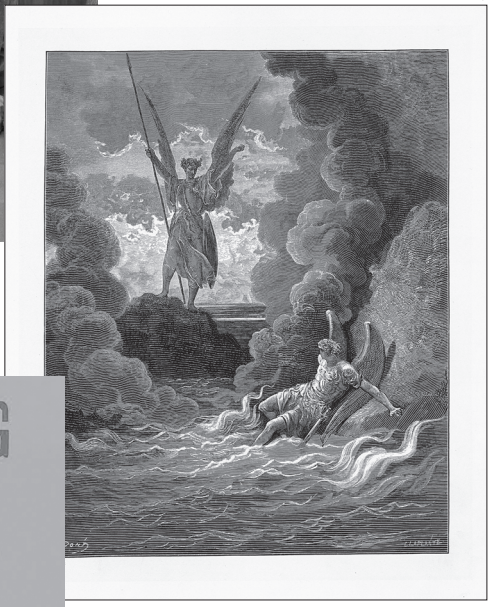
Enjoying this Canadian Independent Bookstore Day edition of our quarterly newsletter? Visit BIBLIOASIS.COM/NEWSLETTER to sign up for future print editions, and follow us on Substack at DIGITALBIBLIOPHILE.SUBSTACK.COM

If You Like . . .

James Baldwin

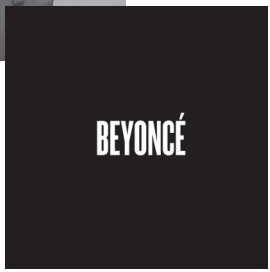
Grappling with difficult truths





Making a heav'n of hell,
a hell of heav'n

A (hilarious) one-woman show



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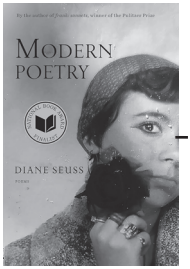
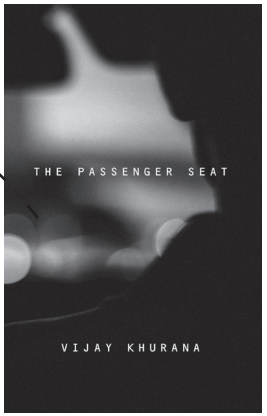
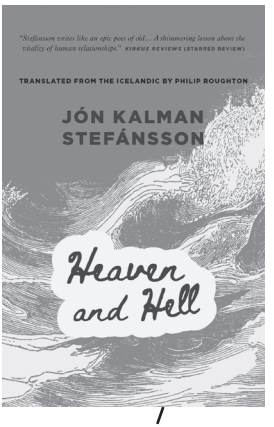


Beyoncé with a side of Diane Seuss

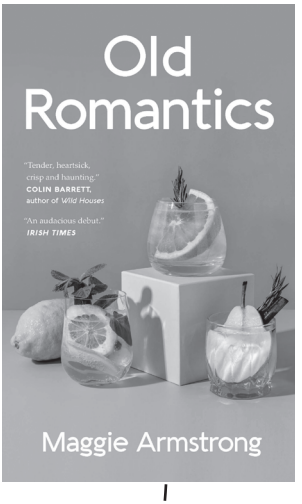


Víjay Khurana's
The Passenger Seat

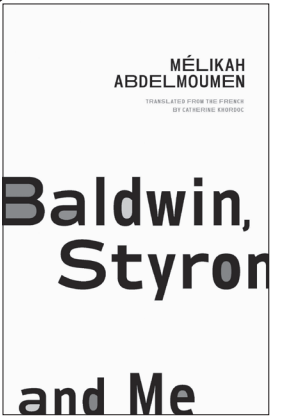


Heaven and Hell
by Jón Kalman Stefánsson

. . . You Should Try

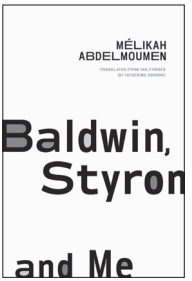


Maggie Armstrong's *Old Romantics*

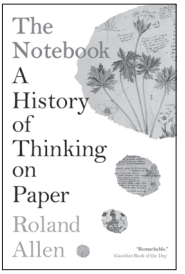


Baldwin, Styron, and Me
by Mélikah Abdelmoumen

UNMET by stephanie roberts



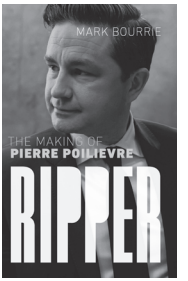
MÉLIKAH ABDELMOUMEN's *Baldwin, Styron, and Me*, translated by CATHERINE KHORDOC, was given a glowing review in the *Associated Press*, which called the book "an intellectual reflection that serves as a valuable contribution to the current debates about race, equity and identity." *Scout Magazine* praised it as "Pragmatic, emotional, timely, and urgent, *Baldwin, Styron and Me* is unlike anything I've read, and is just the sort of book that begs translation in as many languages as possible." Abdelmoumen's examination of the friendship between James Baldwin and William Styron—alongside her own experiences as a racialized woman and the contentious debates around questions of identity, race, and equity—was also reviewed in *Kirkus, The Shakespearean Rag,* and *The Miramichi Reader*.



ROLAND ALLEN's bestselling history title, *The Notebook*, received an in-depth look in the *New Criterion:* "The history's far-flung subtopics and divagations are arranged chronologically, and they all benefit from Allen's unerring ear for the memorable anecdote. So the overall feel of reading a single narrative holds throughout, since the book has two through lines: the notebook itself in all its varying contexts, and the consistently engaging style of the

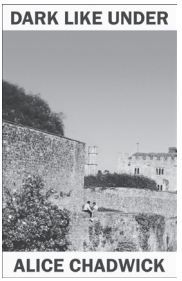
author." *The Notebook* was also named a *New Yorker* Best Book of 2024, a *Globe and Mail* Globe 100 Best Book of 2024, a *LitHub* Noteworthy Nonfiction Book of 2024, and a *Business Standard* Best Nonfiction Book of 2024.

Old Romantics by MAGGIE ARMSTRONG received a rave review in *The Stinging Fly*: "readers of *Old Romantics* will be swept up in the verve of Armstrong's storytelling, but the deeper purpose of the humour, as with all good comedic writing, is that of connection, of recognition . . . *Old Romantics* is a collection big on feeling, on living, romanticism with a capital R." Armstrong's debut fiction has also been widely praised in Irish media, including both the *Irish Times* and *Irish Independent*, and appeared in the *Globe and Mail*'s spring books preview.



Arriving on the scene just in time, *Ripper: The Making of Pierre Poilievre* by MARK BOURRIE has quickly gathered a number of media hits including a *Globe and Mail* feature on its rush to publication, alongside an excerpt from the book and two reviews from Lawrence Martin ("If Pierre Poilievre is going to win, shake [the comparison to Trump] he must. This book, with all its pungent reminders of his record, will make it harder to do.") and Marsha Lederman ("In his

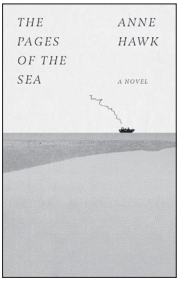
pull-no-punches book, Mr. Bourrie portrays Mr. Poilievre as one serious ripper: mean, sneering, insulting, truth-evading, skilled at whipping up mass anger"). *Ripper* has also been excerpted in *The Walrus*; reviewed in *The Hill Times, UnHerd,* and in Substacks from David Moscrop and Ken McGoogan; and Bourrie has been interviewed on CBC Windsor, and by Dean Blundell.



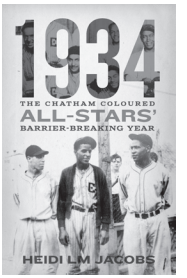
ALICE CHADWICK's forthcoming debut novel *Dark Like Under* was listed as an *Independent* Best Book to Look Out For in 2025, a *The Bookseller* Editor's Choice, and has picked up a flurry of praise from UK media. *Vogue* UK calls it a "unique, evocative take on the coming-of-age novel," while *Marie-Claire* UK writes "Chadwick's prose is delicate, precise and not without a little humour . . . Just lovely." The *Independent* labels it "the sort of haunting novel that sticks in your mind long after you've put it down," and the TLS praises that "Chadwick is not just good at surfaces: she is also capable of brilliant characterization." *Dark Like Under* was also reviewed positively in *The Guardian, Irish Times, The Telegraph, The Observer, Daily Mail,* and *The Crack Magazine.*

LAZER LEDERHENDLER, translator of *The Hollow Beast* by CHRISTOPHE BERNARD, has been shortlisted for the 2025 French-American

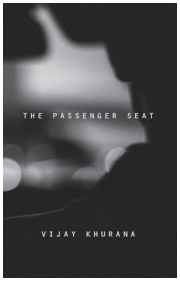
Foundation Translation Prize. *The Hollow Beast* was also a finalist for the 2024 Governor General's Literary Award for Translation, Lederhendler's eleventh nomination overall.



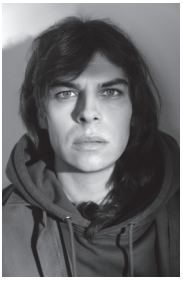
Grenada-born ANNE HAWK's debut novel *The Pages of the Sea* has been shortlisted for the OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature, in the Fiction category. The judges praised that the book "brings new energy and form to a familiar Caribbean childhood, that of the pain and desolation of the child left behind when a parent migrates . . . The prose has an immediacy that matches the girl's intensity, as well as her confusion about what secrets the adults around her appear to be hiding." *The Pages of the Sea* was also named a *Globe and Mail* Globe 100 Best Book of 2024.

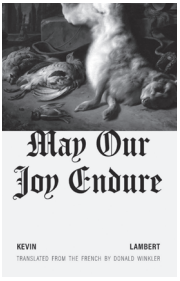


1934: The Chatham Coloured All-Stars' Barrier-Breaking Year by HEIDI LM JACOBS won the 2024 Speaker's Book Award. Drawing heavily on scrapbooks, newspaper accounts, and oral histories from members of the team and their families, *1934* shines a light on a largely overlooked chapter of Black baseball.



The Passenger Seat, VIJAY KHURANA's searing examination of male friendship and toxic masculinity, was praised as an "unsettling and powerful debut novel" by the *New York Times*. The *Literary Review of Canada* noted it will "both mesmerize and refuse comforting resolution," while *Books+Publishing* wrote "Khurana's prose enthralls, marked by a sharp social and sensory realism and a mature emotional intelligence. His ability to capture how physiological reactions often precede cognitive understanding is impressive." *The Passenger Seat* also picked up reviews in *Foreword Reviews*, *Kirkus*, *The* BC *Review*, and was a March 2025 Indie Next Pick and a Winter/Spring 2025 Indies Introduce Pick.



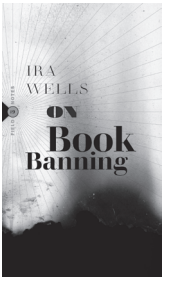


May Our Joy Endure by KEV LAMBERT, translated by DONALD WINKLER, was listed as a *Globe and Mail* Globe 100 Best Book of 2024, a CBC Best Canadian Fiction Book of 2024, and was reviewed in the *Ancillary Review of Books* which noted "[Lambert's] long and almost circular sentences spin and wrap around [their] characters while giving the book a stately, Proustian air."

Heaven and Hell by JÓN KALMAN STEFÁNSSON, translated by PHILIP ROUGHTON, received a review in the *New York Times* which noted that "Stefánsson's narrative voice is the book's most striking quality. It has something in common with the 'slow prose' of Jon Fosse: run-on sentences, rich in repeated motifs, that tap into different layers of thought. A typical line in Philip Roughton's translation is flexible and supple, telescoping from close-up to wider view . . . Once the reader is settled into the rhythms of Stefánsson's prose, we'll go anywhere with him." Another review in the *Literary Review of Canada* was equally complimentary, calling the novel "artfully crafted and arresting . . . Stefánsson excels at turning small places into the absolute centre of the world." *Heaven and Hell* swept up trade reviews from *Publishers Weekly, Booklist, Foreword Reviews*, and *Kirkus Reviews* (starred). In other Stefánsson news, *Your Absence Is Darkness* (trans. Philip Roughton) made it to the shortlist for the 2024 Republic of Consciousness Prize (United States and Canada). The award, which celebrates small presses, honours both authors and translators and their publishers, with a total of $35,000 USD distributed between finalists.

Near Distance, HANNA STOLTENBERG's debut (translated from the Norwegian by WENDY H. GABRIELSEN), received a glowing review from the

Literary Review of Canada calling it "a thoughtfully paced debut," while the *Globe and Mail* noted the way the novel "which won Norway's prestigious Tarjei Vesaas first book award—probes the fraught relationship between fiftysomething Karin and her adult daughter, Helene." A starred review from *Publishers Weekly* calls it "a winner" and the *Complete Review* praises its "strong character- and relationship-portrait." Stoltenberg also received reviews in the *Winnipeg Free Press, Ottawa Review of Books, The Guardian,* and more.



On Book Banning by IRA WELLS, an examination of the longstanding practice of banning books, was summed up nicely in the *Globe and Mail*: "the latest in Biblioasis's continuing Field Notes series, Wells seeks to define the controversial practice and explore its effects." A starred review from *Quill & Quire* calls the slim book "a testament to the life-altering power of books and ideas," while the *Winnipeg Free Press* calls it "a masterful and provocative treatise about the nature of free speech and the power of the written word." *On Book Banning* has also garnered praise in *Foreword Reviews, Kirkus,* and *The Miramichi Reader*; was featured in the *Toronto Star,* and two articles from the *Canadian School Library Journal*; and Ira Wells has appeared on numerous podcasts including *Get Lit, Canadaland*, the *Quillette Podcast*, *Lean Out with Tara Henley*, and more.

20 Stores —for— 20 Years

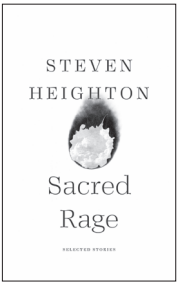
Celebrating our recent birthday with twenty of our favourite independent bookshops.

There could have have been dozens of others, but 2014's *I Was There the Night He Died* by Ray Robertson was the book that turned Biblioasis from a publisher that was kinda cool to the one I looked at first when seasonal buying came around. The tone, humour, and depth of character simply wasn't present in a lot of Canadian fiction at the time, and it suggested an outfit that operated differently form the rest.

In the ensuing ten years, both Ray and his publisher have gotten better and better.

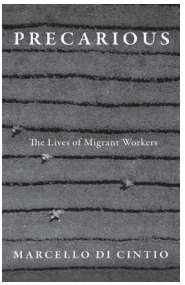
DAVID WORSLEY, WORDS WORTH BOOKS (WATERLOO, ON)

Forthcoming from Biblioasis



Sacred Rage: Selected Stories
Steven Heighton

With an introduction by John Metcalf, *Sacred Rage* selects stories spanning the range of the late Steven Heighton's remarkable career as a write of short fiction.

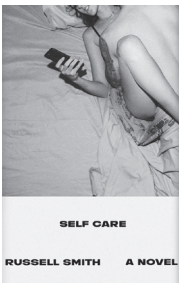


Precarious: The Lives of Migrant Workers
Marcello Di Cintio

A series of profiles of foreign workers illuminates the precarity of global systems of migrant labor and the vulnerability of their most disenfranchised agents.

Big of You: Stories
Elise Levine

At turns playful, blistering, unabashed, defiant, these stories examine striving and ambition under the spectre of late-stage capitalism while contending with the hauntings of the past.



Self-Care
Russell Smith

An electric examination of women and men, sex and love, self-loathing and twenty-first century loneliness, *Self-Care* is a devastating novel about all the ways we try to cope—with ourselves, and with each other.

Edited by Dan Wells and designed and typeset by Vanessa Stauffer,
The Bibliophile *is produced with the assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and Ontario Creates.*

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Featuring:

A CONVERSATION WITH IRA WELLS

AN INTERVIEW WITH VIJAY KHURANA

EXCERPTS FROM NEW NONFICTION BY

MÉLIKAH ABDELMOUMEN

& DON GILLMOR

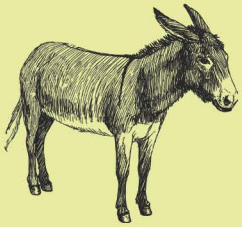
POEMS BY STEPHANIE ROBERTS

AN ESSAY BY MARK BOURRIE

A SHORT STORY BY MAGGIE ARMSTRONG

A COMIC BY JASON GURIEL

and much more!



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