

BOOK REVIEWS

The Stone Carvers. By Jane Urquhart. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2001. 392 pages. \$21.00 paper.

Just as *Away* begins in an Irish setting and moves to Canada, the dreams and obsessions of the characters transferred to the new land, so *The Stone Carvers* begins in Bavaria with Father Gstir's dream of a church with a mellifluous bell which he hopes to repatriate. Many of the themes and preoccupations in *Away* and *The Underpainter* linger in *The Stone Carvers*; but here obsession takes on a new focus originating in the historical figure of the sculptor, Walter Allward, and his World War I monument in Arras, France and a resonance emanating from the various characters, many of them "stone carvers," who in the course of the novel enact or express through art their own dreams or inhibitions and, in the process, consummate or expiate those passions to achieve "balance." Or alternatively, following Allward's example, they become victims of those same obsessions.

Although Father Gstir believes his dream of obtaining a bell from the capricious Bavarian King Ludwig for his parish church is for the greater glory of God, he realizes on receiving it after years of waiting that the bell was actually for himself. In a moment of self-truth, he finds "that the details of how to manage his heart's desire" were going to have to be reconsidered, "arrangements were going to have to be made." Although he is not yet an old man, the stress of fulfilment at this point in his middle age proves overwhelming:

A stroke? A heart attack? Who would say, there being no medical expert in the vicinity. On the bedside table was a scrap of paper on which was written in a shaky hand, *I committed the sin of covetousness. Pray for me. The bell* (148)

When his friend, Joseph Becker, who had carved an open-air altar for his church, discovers the priest with the note beside him, he "crumple[s] the note in his fist and stuff[s] it in his pocket," but, significantly, tells no one about it. Then, he proceeds to make all the arrangements for the bell's installation. Thus others are allowed to enjoy the fruits of what was once a poor priest's whim.

That the artist or dreamer puts something of himself/herself into the artwork becomes clear when Klara unconsciously reflects her own anger on the features of the life-size statue of an abbess which she had resumed carving shortly after her lover signed up for the war, following his own dream of flying an aeroplane. On presenting her "perfected" abbess to her grandfather, he, however, complains:

“Too hard, too angry,” he said after a long, contemplative silence. “She looks like she’s a fishwife, a shrew. There is no authority in that. No priest would have listened to a word she said, never mind a pope.” (152)

His criticism, while alarming her, opens her eyes somewhat, and we see that Klara’s disappointment in love threatens to harden her and guess what role she might subconsciously fashion for herself. Fortunately, she proves a strong-minded and resourceful woman.

Years later, a middle-aged Klara, disguised as a man, joins Allward’s crew working on the monument and illicitly carves the remembered features of her lover lost during the war. No longer to repress pain, her intention now is to express what was once her passion. Although Allward is presented as a self-seeking man with a myopia outside the boundaries of his own art, he intuitively grasps Klara’s inspiration. After his initial anger that his “plan” for the statue to express the anonymity of the multitudinous casualties has been “ruined,” he allows the portrait to stand, while discouraging further bursts of originality from Klara and his workman “pons.” Making the most of the dramatic possibilities with careful attention to character, Urquhart applies an almost Shakespearean aplomb to this scene of mistaken gender in which Klara’s identity as a woman is unveiled.

Whereas Klara expiates her sorrow and achieves “balance” by carving her lover’s features on the torchbearer and, later, guided by her new lover, Giorgio’s hand, by carving the letters “E. O. Sullivan” on the monument, Allward’s obsession with his artwork and the public sorrow it “houses” continues to haunt him long after the monument’s completion. For years “Allward’s ambition had rolled heavily, *turgidly* through his mind” like the cloud formations he had studied that would complement his structures, and with the mere completion of the monument, he cannot let go. As he confesses to Klara and Giorgio: “I’ve been eating and sleeping stone for so long that it has become an obsession with me. And, incidentally, a nightmare” (376).

A preoccupation with dreams that consume the dreamer and the human cost of art and immortality is, of course, not new. Another memorable modern treatment of the theme occurs in Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*, where Rowland Harris sacrifices human lives to his dream of completing a bridge in Toronto. In *The Stone Carvers*, however, the treatment is at once more focused and the exploration more far-reaching as we witness the lives and examples of the various characters against the background figure of Walter Allward, the most extreme example of all. In the end, we are called upon to celebrate the dreams and obsessions that leave us with such a legacy.

Gillian Harding-Russell

Regina, Saskatchewan

A Far Time. By J.A. Wainwright. Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 2001. 198 pages. \$20.00.

A Far Time is Andy Wainwright's second novel, following on his very successful fictional account of Mallory's last attempt of Everest, *A Deathful Ridge* (1997). It begins in California in the 1960s and moves through Montreal, London, Lesbos and Ibiza following the career of a young writer as he learns to draw together his craft and his life across the territory of a number of years and a number of loves. Part fiction and part memoir, it shares with the Mallory book an enthusiasm for mixing genres and for formal experimentation.

A Far Time draws especially on what is clearly a watershed time for the author, a period spent on the Mediterranean in the 1970s which Wainwright has treated in earlier poetry and short fiction. One senses early on that it is the solid ground of memoir we are treading, and some of the best passages in the book are those which bear plain witness to a remarkable time (to early Hendrix and Joplin performances in California for example). But Wainwright goes to considerable lengths to blur the line between fact and fiction, just as he does the line between time past and present. The book works out, in an extended prose form, a problem Wainwright had set himself as early as 1981 in the preface to his book of poems, *After the War*. There he states, and he might as easily be speaking about the present book: "Ibiza is literally one place in the Mediterranean, but it is also a memory of place in my mind. The time I spent there happened, the time I remember is happening. Now I am aware of related and disparate images no longer seen singly but flowing into a pattern, an entirety of one place-time that includes past and present, fact and fiction I would like to convey with words that rush of experience—as it was happening to me (or fact-fiction me) and as it continues to happen to me (who creates the fact-fiction) now." In *A Far Time* Wainwright collapses together the experiences of a man in his fifties (like Wainwright himself, a professor of literature and creative writing) and those of his younger self, the youthful writer whom he recalls across the thirty intervening years. This is managed by lightening the markers that would conventionally distinguish the one who acts from the one who remembers, and by confounding their sense of place; it leads at first to some confusion about the subject and sequence of events, and then to a kind of resonance—of events recurring in and also being manipulated through memory. There is an inherent poignancy in the shape of the narrative which results, the poignancy of living memory. The effect is to generate a sort of progressive pluperfect: the story is elegiac, but at the same time unfinished, continuous, in process, and still, manifestly, impinging on the present.

"There were things I'd left behind there, and I wanted to see if I could write about them ... who we all were before things started to explode. There's a gap between us then and who we've become," says the youthful protagonist; negotiating between past and present is his motive in writing. This is the work that Wainwright has set himself as well—to close that gap and to offer a

reprise of the book's beautiful epigraph (from Daphne Marlatt): "Where there are ghosts, there is always hunger; for the life unlived the knot that draws desire back; something unresolved, ongoing."

Robert Finley

Hobart, Australia

The Accidental Indies. By Robert Finley. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2000. 102 pages. \$27.95.

When Columbus sketches the exquisite headland he imagines from a sailor's story, the narrator remarks: "There is great beauty in it, this abstract, its innocence, framing nothing but the essential shapes, leaving the rest" (11). This description of the sketch could represent *The Accidental Indies* itself, for everything about Robert Finley's book is beautiful: the cover, the paper, the typesetting, the artwork, the prose, and everyone involved in its production deserves high praise for the quality of the craft in it and congratulations for the success it has already enjoyed. Nominated for the Thomas Raddall Atlantic Fiction Award and winner of the inaugural 2001 Cunard First Book Award, *The Accidental Indies* was a national best-seller in the fiction category though it has also been described as prose poem and, in the author's own words, a "lyric-story-essay." Even as it bedevils genre expectations, the book has received widespread and well-deserved acclaim for its dazzling energy and elegant prose.

The Accidental Indies refashions those themes and ideas in post colonial literary history and criticism that bring to light the excess, absurdity, and blindness of imperial conquest. It begins from the premise that the discovery of a new world is really a shifting paradigm. Renaissance maps serve as metaphors and illustrations representing the power of language to create worlds, or at least ways of seeing them. From the moment the infant Columbus falls on his head and "first tested the heft and roundness of this world" (7), the discovery of the Indies is not accident but the fulfilment of destiny. Here is the irony of the book's title, for this Columbus lives by certainty, not hazard. Accompanying Columbus from his cradle to the return from his journey, the storyteller is the postmodern conscience shaped by the impressive historical research represented in the acknowledgements, an articulate presence manipulating the scenes, instructing the reader, and posing the questions. It is tracing "the journey of an idea outward into language" (84) that allows the narrator to find beauty in the accidents, blind purpose, and brutal will that is the history of colonization. While the narrative is structured as a meditation on a series of questions, it moves forward as "the inevitable happens" (5). Thus, playfully citing questions from Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, the storyteller concludes: "The questions are unnecessary. Columbus knows what to expect" (11). For instance, Columbus may be a "literalist of the imagination" (39), but the narrator knows that "charts chart the numinous and are the textbooks for a certain kind of yearning" (56). Through this imaginative re-

construction of the Renaissance imagination, *The Accidental Indies* achieves coherence of theme and form.

The book ends as Columbus offers the spoils of his conquest with a sweeping gesture, and the narrator observes that “each thing as it is named and brought forward opens a doorway into the empty world of loss” (94). These beautiful ‘things’ include “six Indians, nearly naked; a dozen parrots, some stuffed, some chained to perches; several trays of artifacts, fruits and samples; a small safe-chest of gold; a golden mask; a few pearls in a copper cup; some cotton cloth” (94). There the ‘rest’ is left, lovely and silent, a tribute to the terrible aesthetic of the Western imagination.

Renée Hulan

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Iron Mountain. By Mark Frutkin. Vancouver: Beach Holme Publishing, 2001. 104 pages. \$12.95 paper.

It is now, more than ever, a rare and private pleasure, in the midst of what appears to be an increasingly volatile world, to read such quiet, meditative poems as these. In Ottawa writer Mark Frutkin’s third poetry volume, the reader encounters writing that presents life as a kind of ongoing explorative canvas—one that delicately, though sure-handedly captures shifting patterns of death, rebirth, and the many suggestive synchronicities that accompany an artist’s creative attunement to natural rhythms. What unifies this collection of two books and nine sections is a consistent philosophical vision of the human impulse to create harmonizing images in response to life’s pain, uncertainty, and ultimate mystery. While not all poems in the volume succeed, this collection is undeniably a powerful one that provides many worthwhile epiphanies and glimpses.

The collection’s first book is a particularly rich one that focuses on ideas and images drawn from ancient Chinese art. “Horsehair Brush,” the volume’s opening piece from the section entitled *Journey to Shu*, establishes an appropriate “quest” motif through the focused contemplation of a spiritual pilgrimage—revealing the connectedness of all things, and immediately establishing affinities between art and human life. In his sensitive, painterly lines Frutkin approximates the delicacy of oriental art through verbal brushstrokes that give the poem the gentle resonance of a visual koan. One is struck too by the poet’s paradoxical presentation of purpose vs. aesthetic absence of purpose. Consider, for example, the lines:

The artist paints with a brush of horsehair
drawn from the horse he is painting
Mountains and forests, ambiguous,
their folds spontaneous and immeasurable
Ambiguous too the path
threading through them

like smoke
 rising from a mountain hut.
 At first it holds steady,
 a solid stream,
 then splays and shreds
 in a thousand branches.

Why are we going to Shu? Remind me
 the Emperor on his majestic horse
 questions his lieutenant.

This image of the emperor in search appears several times in the first part of the collection, conjuring the symbolic notion of the human ego as a kind of natural seeker of meaning and solace in spite of grief, suffering, and the inevitability of its own eventual dissolution. These spare, yet powerful lines from "Chaos" underscore the point very well:

I am the Emperor,
 yet the world is an avalanche of sorrows
 and I can do nothing.

Long ago I gave up searching
 yet I ride on.

I take my case in a poor man's hut.
 How is it my heart is soothed
 by the sight of two wooden buckets
 resting side by side in the doorway?

Some of Frutkin's most striking poems are those that assume an almost yoga-like poetic disposition—providing a satisfying verbal stretch toward the transcendent, that remains balanced and grounded by a silent core of humility, as in "Disappearance":

Springs turn to summer, red leaves and falling needles
 give way to a landscape glowing with snow.
 He has lost all desire to reach the highest peak,
 content that the mountains go on and on
 without end, as the stream beside him
 never ceases its gurgling
 like an infant learning to speak.

Interestingly, when the actual poet/ego steps into certain poems (as in "Inside Gatineau Park") the verse takes on a slightly forced, denotative quality. It seems to be the detached observer and persona poems that have the greater impact.

The section *Chinese Shards*, while an interesting attempt, is less successful. Here, the poet's contemplation of museum pieces is overall a bit chilly and distant (a natural danger given the subject matter). "Fragment of Heaven and Earth," the writer's reflection upon Chinese exhibits at the Royal Ontario Museum, for example, does little to illuminate the potential richness of synchronicity, and seems more an attempt to be clever than anything else. The collection quickly picks up momentum again, however, with such poems as "Drunk Addresses the Night Sky"—an evocatively-worded piece from the section entitled *Measuring Dust*:

Argues with stars,
 questions their logic, their patterns,
 why this order and no other?
 Confers concerning distant light geometries.
 The stars listen.
 No need to shout into vast silence,
 whisper to the ends of the universe,
 word travels,
 speed of thought.
 Is he dizzy? Does he stumble?
 Do they, the stars shivering with cold?
 What is the logic of this place?
 Silence.

This poem, like the rest in this particularly rich thematic section, focuses on the ultimate impossibility of attaining enlightenment through empirical measurement.

The section entitled *Creation as Fresco Cycle* is an ambitious one, providing a number of poetic responses to artists from various times and places: from Baudelaire to Degas, Garcia Lorca to Picasso. While there are many memorable lines in this section, the two best pieces are "Boulevard du Temple, Paris, 1839," which sensitively recaptures the image depicted in Daguerre's first photograph, and "Recipe for Light and the Elements," an earthy, vital poem that celebrates the work of Québec painter Ozias Leduc through such sensuous lines as:

Cut open an onion, let the light
 leak out.
 Break open a peach, let spring
 ooze forth, rivers run, skies rush.
 Halve an apple and release
 earth's simple memories.

"First Snow of Silence" from *Nymphalidae* is an intensely quiet piece that successfully conjures the near-monastic pleasure of private contemplation that winter often brings. Its concluding lines are especially resonant:

When silence has reached
 a depth as deep as the moon
 I will put on Glenn Gould
 playing the piano
 and watch ice grow in staves
 from the eaves.

The volume concludes with the section *Wilderness*, which contains poems of varying levels of success. “Creation Myths” provides an inviting, again painterly treatment of cosmology and the vibrant, vitalizing chaos that the trickster figure lends to these traditional tales. In “Nine Haikus” Frutkin mines the rich metaphors of commonplace events, as in:

A cold day in spring
 in a yard on a block of ice
 a tattered telephone book.

Poems such as “Reinventing the World” (among others)—involving the flow of time and eternity—are interesting, though perhaps overly ambitious in their scope; here Frutkin’s playful-sweeping together of disparate historical events seems rather too sprawling and amorphous to produce any truly striking poetic effect. “Wilderness,” the volume’s final poem, should be an appropriate closing piece with its paradoxical appreciation of nothingness vs. the human instinct to analyze, chart, and invent. Unfortunately, however, the language here is flat, monotone, dreary, and does not carry the reader along fully into the idea as it does in other poems. While Frutkin’s philosophical and spiritual concerns always come across as a completely authentic and distinctive component of his poetic voice, these expressions are only fully realized when he has sufficiently honed his imagery.

Taken as a whole, however, this collection contains many excellently crafted poems that provide insightful, illuminated moments for disillusioned twenty-first-century readers and seekers alike. This is, after all, the kind of strengthening antidote that good poetry so often can provide.

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Ottawa

Thinks . . . By David Lodge. London: Secker & Warburg, 2001. 342 pages. \$39.95.

Headlong. By Michael Frayn. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1999. 352 pages. \$26.00 US.

You have to admire the courage of authors who give their protagonists highly specialized professions: it’s hard to write convincingly about an occupation not your own. For one thing, it’s likely that you’ll get things wrong, and embarrass yourself in front of the real professionals. (This possibility even

figures as part of the plot of Lodge's *Thinks ...*: a novelist agrees very reluctantly, and with trepidation, to address a scientific/philosophical conference on consciousness. A po-mo reflexive joke.) For another, if technical details of the protagonist's discipline figure in the plot, then the author is going to have to figure out how to explain these to a general audience without interrupting the narrative with introductory lectures.

Both novels have philosophers as main protagonists, and they handle these problems differently. In Frayn's book, the philosopher-hero has taken a year off from teaching to write a book on the impact of nominalism on Netherlandish art of the fifteenth century. His idea is a cute one: nominalism is the position that only individual things really exist, and that classifications are merely verbal associations made by us; you can see that in the art's concentration on particulars, represented as real and somewhat random objects and individuals, not as representations of abstractions or as archetypes. And there are obvious connections here with the Reformation, the replacement of the Platonic Christian world view with an earthly humanistic empiricism. But that's maybe all that can be said about this little insight; I wouldn't think it could grow into a book. It's not clear whether Frayn is presenting this as an idealet without a future for expansion. Frayn has his philosopher explain his research at a dinner party in a donnish (but accurate) short lecture which, it's clear, nobody understands—the slightly goofy hostess later mentions his study of “normalism.” That's just about the last we hear about philosophy in the novel. The philosopher never gets around to writing anything. His hosts have asked him over hoping he might be able to identify and sell some old paintings they've acquired, and his first-person narration carries on at very great length about his discoveries concerning the history and art of fifteenth-century Netherlands—maybe at greater length than you care for. (Why make the protagonist a philosopher at all?)

Thinks ... on the other hand does make a good deal of use of philosophy. The philosopher heads a cognitive science institute, devoted to attempting to explain consciousness as information-processing, by creating or at least conceiving of a computer program to do it. Lodge has his (male) philosopher explain the basics of this field at length to the other main character, a (female) novelist (and when they're not arguing about whether a computer program or a novel is the best way to understand human mysteries, they're (you guessed it) dancing around the idea of going to bed together). Lodge has been well-advised on the basics of contemporary philosophy of cognition: his philosopher gets it right and explains it clearly; though sometimes his philosopher's thoughts on the matter, dictated for his own use into a tape recorder, sound like my Philosophy 1000 lectures—too elementary for someone supposed to be a specialist.

Thinks ... cleverly integrates its intellectual content with the plot and theme of the novel. Both the characters' talk and the novel itself are about the battle between emotion/intuition/art and rationality/logic/science and the fact that our consciousness contains more than we show—that we can never know for certain what another person is thinking. These themes are always

strongly present in what is on the surface an occasionally amusing comedy of manners and adultery set in a provincial English university. *Headlong* is also a comedy of manners and adultery, but it, by contrast, presents no thematic connection between the historical/art-historical lectures and the plot. Its plot gives an excuse for carry-on at great length about the art and politics of Reformation Netherlands, but this is rather unnervingly disconnected from the sometimes humorous, sometimes suspenseful plot and its personalities who, with the exception of the narrator, are rather thinly drawn—an inevitable result, I suppose, when such a large proportion of the novel is devoted to Bruegel's life and times.

Both authors have a long history of writing very funny books (and plays, in Frayn's case). I giggled a lot at Lodge's *Going Places*, and Frayn's early *Towards the End of the Morning* is one of the funniest novels I've read. Disappointingly, however, *Thinks ...* and *Headlong* are, well, *clever*—light and diverting, but not really funny. You can tell in both when passages are meant to be hilarious farce, but they don't quite make it. Maybe there's a pattern here: many of my favourite comic writers replace the laugh-out-loud funny with the ruefully witty as they get older. Don't do that, you old guys! We need the laughs.

Robert M. Martin

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