

## BOOK REVIEWS

Kris Bertin and Alexander Forbes, *The Case of the Missing Men*

Wolfville: Conundrum Press, 2017

304 pages, \$20, ISBN 9781772620160

In June of this year Halifax writer Kris Bertin posted a photo to Twitter with the following caption: “I’m certain I’m the only person on the planet travelling with this configuration of reading materials.” The photo shows four books lying on a rug: Ted R. Hennigar’s *Scotian Spooks, Mystery and Violence* (1978), John Robert Colombo’s *UFOs Over Canada: Personal Accounts of Sightings and Close Encounters* (1996), David Cruise and Alison Griffiths’ *On South Mountain: The Dark Secrets of the Goler Clan* (1997), and Don Ledger’s *Maritime UFO Files* (1998). The covers of these books are garishly designed, frozen in the respective years of their publication and almost immediate obsolescence. Uncommon source material for literary fiction, this resilient and unapologetically trashy genre has served Bertin well in his latest endeavor, *The Case of the Missing Men*. Following up on his award-winning debut collection of short stories, *Bad Things Happen* (2016), Bertin here veers into a measured flippancy toward genre convention and gives a full-throated exculpation of the paranormal and the weird. His latest work also celebrates the (dis)comforts of twentieth-century popular culture—from *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964) to *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991)—and grafts its wonderful narrative idiosyncrasies onto the solitude of the vanishing Nova Scotian hinterlands.

Bertin’s collaborator is illustrator and childhood friend Alexander Forbes, who provides the astounding pen-and-ink vehicle for *The Case of the Missing Men*. Any artist who has attempted to render the beauty of Nova Scotia’s coastal wilds will tell you that what is captivating about those vistas is not the scruffy trees on the banks or the ragged imposing cliffs but rather the dramatic movement of sea and sky, clouds and waves—a movement that Forbes captures masterfully with the insight of Franklin Booth. His line also

provides unspeakable tones to what he calls “Maritime Gothic,” and the patient reader will be rewarded for lingering over his stunning renderings of Nova Scotia’s vernacular architecture.

Set in the fictional Hobtown, the novel follows a gang of teenage detectives, “The Hobtown Detectives Club,” as they get in over their heads investigating a rash of strange disappearances and grisly murders. The gang is led by the brooding, quasi-orphaned boy genius Sam Finch, who at times reads like a teenage Bruce Wayne. Finch’s foil is Dana Nance, the pipe-smoking president of Hobtown High’s “Mystery Club,” who appears to be a darkly energetic take on Nancy Drew. Both characters thus provide footholds in the salient history of twentieth-century popular culture as they explore the wonderfully bizarre uncanny of twentieth-century Nova Scotia. As Dana winkingly admits in the story’s epilogue, “Whatever they’re after, it’s something really weird.”

Readers encounter Nova Scotia’s enveloping overcast sky on the first page, which reveals a kitschy Maritime grocery store, a man in a yellow rain slicker, quaint but unsettling folk-art sculptures, and a woody station wagon. These iconic images are assembled into a potent collage of nostalgic themes that are indicative of an artistic interlude in which Saturday morning cartoons mingle alongside experimental NFB short films and Bill Jessome’s *Maritime Mysteries* (1990-1998). The novel is also set in the mid-1990s—a decade during which Satanic Panic, recovered memories, and multiple personalities coalesced with a new industry of junk television and cable news. It thus allows readers to revisit a time when popular culture was positively pulsating with weird hysteria.

A common refuge of slacker rhetoric in the 1990s, words like “weird,” “cool,” and “whatever” came to embody the nebulous ennui of the younger generation. In particular, the epithet “weird” comes across far more precisely in Bertin’s world than the world that gave it to us. The kids utter the word sixteen times in the course of the novel’s generally lean dialogue, and the imprecision of each utterance seems to bring them closer to determining the nature of the fantastical, strange, frightening, and uncanny occurrences that plague the town. As recently as the late nineteenth century, “weird” was as much a noun as a verb that referred to the offering of a premonition decreed by fate. So goes the misconception that the weirdness of Macbeth’s “weird sisters” comes from Banquo getting “weirded out” rather than their unsettlingly fatalistic prophecies. In *The Case of the Missing Men*, the weird

fulfils all of its archaic and contemporary meanings. The waifish, big-eyed Pauline, for example, appears at first to be a seemingly harmless optimist yet eventually turns out to be a kind of soothsayer who is able at times to discern the fates of her fellow junior detectives.

In recent years the graphic novel has itself enjoyed a kind of oracular status in the field of pastiche and satire, and it has always been the central repository of the weird. American cartoonist Charles Burns' *Black Hole* (2005) and *X'ed Out* (2010) explore the dark and diseased psychic nature of youth, for example, while the noir comics of Norwegian cartoonist John Arne Sæterøy (better known by his pen name Jason) participate in the tradition of the supernatural macabre. Canadian cartoonist Jeff Lemire's widely-celebrated nightmare of the Atlantic Coast, *The Underwater Welder* (2012), might well be considered a precursor to *The Case of the Missing Men*. Without ever relying on the well of gratuitous sex, drugs, and violence that routinely water contemporary teenage suspense stories, Bertin narrowly but expertly pilots a course from potboiler detective pulp to astoundingly inventive thriller.

—Donald Calabrese, Cape Breton University

Jillian Tamaki, *Boundless*

Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2017

248 pages, \$27.95, ISBN 9781770462878

Jillian Tamaki is perhaps best known for her collaborations with her cousin Mariko. In their award-winning graphic novels *Skim* (2008) and *This One Summer* (2014), the duo pair soft, contemplative images with casual adolescent dialogue, immersing readers in the beautiful and awkward world of teenage girlhood. Tamaki also brought this playful, introspective tone to her webcomic and subsequent collection *SuperMutant Magic Academy* (2015), which features an odd mix of teens with atypical bodies and achingly typical problems all fumbling through crushes, self-esteem issues, and existential crises.

Tamaki has refined her contemplative humour in *Boundless*, her new collection of short comics and comics poetry. She also brings a specific temporal structure to these comics by favouring narration over dialogue, as the images serve to illustrate memories that are narrated and reflected upon

by the protagonists. Readers witness their lives through the lens of their present selves, and the words come from a present-tense perspective that is often cynical, nostalgic, or both.

This reflective dynamic is strongest in the comics anchored in fictional cultural phenomena—namely, “Body Pods,” “1. Jenny,” “Darla,” and “Sex Coven.” Each of these pieces incorporates fictional cultural references that influence the characters’ lives, such as a series of science fiction movies beloved by young men (including a woman’s string of disappointing boy-friends), an alternate-universe Facebook, a pornographic sitcom, and a mysterious audio track that has hallucinatory effects on listeners. Tamaki clearly understands how cultural texts work on and through us, and she traces the socialization of texts and people in moving and exciting ways. She also isn’t afraid to take the time and space to explain things to her readers, and these expository monologues feel engrossing rather than pedantic when set against her gorgeous images and soft colour palette.

Tamaki also experiments with new styles and genres by including two strange comics poems—“World-Class City” and “Boundless”—that have a different layout than the rest of the book, as the reader must turn the book sideways so that the conventional two-page spread becomes one long vertical panel. Both of these poems also do away with any grid or border structure (though Tamaki rarely uses borders in this book, preferring images that fill the page or creating vague borders out of white space). In the first piece, “World-Class City,” strange creatures navigate a leafy beige world, and the upbeat words make the jumble of images feel exciting and vibrant. The overall effect is lyrical, offering a rhyming structure that seems to call out for music. The second piece, “Boundless,” is a drily humorous look into the lives of three animals: a bird, a squirrel, and a fly. Tamaki gleefully anthropomorphizes these creatures, giving them petty thoughts and anxieties: “I believe I am hated,” states the fly, “for reasons I don’t understand.” The fly goes on to quote English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who is cited as a major influence on its approach to life. This passage is a testament to Tamaki’s skill, as she is able to find creativity and humour in the most minute or mundane detail.

There are some clear influences on Tamaki’s work. Her colour palette and emphasis on interiority, for example, seem to recall Seth’s work—particularly the soft style of *It’s A Good Life, If You Don’t Weaken* (1996). Tamaki’s short comic “The Clairfree System” also seems to be directly influenced

by Emily Carroll's webcomic *Some Other Animal's Meat* (2016), which also focuses on someone involved in a skincare multilevel marketing scheme. Tamaki echoes Carroll most clearly with her image of two hands massaging one another, as the sales pitch hinges on the careful intimacy of applying lotion to a client's hand. But while Carroll turns this attention on flesh and body into a horror story, Tamaki offers a series of vague images related to beauty, bodies, and purity: sculptures; people breastfeeding; a smooth, young face contrasted with a hairy, shadowy figure. She also traces disturbing parallels between our desire to be young, pure, and nourished and our vulnerability to corporate greed and manipulation. It's exciting to see Canadian cartoonists influencing each other with images and techniques picked up and re-mixed into new pieces.

Tamaki seems less interested in developing long or coherent narratives without her cousin-collaborator Mariko, but she is still able to craft intriguing and amusing characters in these short, fragmented comics, such as the resourceful and vindictive squirrel, the sarcastic and resentful cult members, and the steadily shrinking woman. Tamaki thus succeeds in creating a series of beautiful little worlds—worlds that are at once soft and stimulating, realistic and fantastic—that are sure to leave readers simultaneously satisfied and eager for more.

—Kaarina Mikalson, Dalhousie University

Jessica Campell, *XTC69*

Toronto: Koyama Press, 2018

120 pages, \$15.25, ISBN 9781927668573

Jessica Campell's second full-length graphic novel, *XTC69*, is a space odyssey focused on gender dynamics and told in a series of black-and-white panels. The story begins with three female astronauts from the all-female planet "L8DZN1T3" (Ladies Night) arriving on Earth in search of males with whom to breed. Although the population of the Earth has been wiped out by nuclear attacks from North Korea, which sparked World War III, the astronauts find a young artist named Jessica Campbell, who has been preserved in a stasis chamber in her parents' basement. Campbell joins their intergalactic search, and the four travellers soon arrive at a third planet, "MXPX," which is emblazoned with a giant penis when seen from space and

whose inhabitants consist entirely of men who embody the worst masculine stereotypes. The central government is located in a building called “Dave’s Crossfit, Drones, Fishing, Amps, Comics, and Government,” the law requires women to wear robes that cover their faces and expose their breasts, and the citizens claim that women abandoned the planet “because those ingrate bitches wouldn’t give us nice guys a chance.” As one horror-stricken astronaut exclaims, “We cannot in good conscience breed with these creatures.” I am reluctant to spoil the ending for would-be readers; suffice to say, the astronauts eventually find a way to live without men, and they presumably live happily ever after.

A clear high point of Campbell’s novel is the sheer visibility of women and particularly a future in which they command their own spaceships, adeptly use and invent cutting-edge technologies, and ask questions about “Earth’s understanding of quantum physics.” The narrative flows smoothly across panels, always communicating through speech bubbles or wordless illustrations rather than long chunks of text. The drawings look deliberately hasty, much like the style of Sarah Andersen’s *Sarah’s Scribbles* (2011-), enabling the story to progress in a simple and fast-paced fashion. Yet, while the story is easy to follow, the plot remains elusive. The story moves more like a dream sequence than a carefully-constructed narrative, which perhaps suits a space odyssey focused on wandering and exploration. Many details are never explained, events that seem like major plot points end up having no bearing on the story, and the ending is arguably abrupt. Campbell has created many short comics and only recently ventured into longer narratives with her debut graphic novel *Hot or Not: 20th-Century Male Artists* (2016), so perhaps the transition between short strips and book-length narratives is still a work in progress.

Campbell’s style is bold, humorous, and largely void of nuance, as it relies heavily on deliberately exaggerated stereotypes. These stereotypes are certainly amusing (who hasn’t known a Chad who labelled someone a “fem-inazi” for standing up for basic human rights?), but I wonder if they provide a helpful way of talking about the problem of sexism at a time when many women are still forced to become objects of the male gaze (albeit probably not in a literal stadium filled with ogling men). While the commander of the spaceship acknowledges that gender exists on a spectrum, we see no evidence of this spectrum within the novel; instead, like the old adage about men being from Mars and women being from Venus, the genders literally

exist on separate worlds. In an interview with *Inside/Within*—a website that promotes Chicago artists—Campbell said, “I feel like speaking something out loud or making something publicly visible removes its power. . . . If I make work about something that I fear and then put it out into the world, it won’t have the same type of power over me.” Campbell’s novel clearly expresses those fears by speaking sexism aloud, but does that remove its power? And is blowing up a planet riddled with toxic masculinity (spoiler), even in satire, really the best solution? Does this type of extreme polarization help to point out a problem through hyperbole or simply shut down dialogue?

Regardless as to how one feels about Campbell’s use of stereotypes, she is certainly self-aware and her humour is delightfully tongue-in-cheek. In a final series of panels, she illustrates an interaction between herself and an interviewer who expresses concern that her work is sexist towards men. Without missing a beat, she replies, “A man read it and said it was fine. Plus, you know, some of my best friends are men.” However, it is not only the portrayal of men that concerns me in this story. I worry that Campbell’s hyperbolic humour—whether she intends it to or not—risks making a farce of the lived realities of many women by undercutting sexism and even sexual abuse with comedy. In the age of #metoo and a wage gap that inexplicably still exists, I, for one, would prefer a more viable solution than mass destruction.

—Sharon Vogel, Dalhousie University

Michael Comeau, *Winter’s Cosmos*  
 Toronto: Koyama Press, 2018  
 304 pages, \$20, ISBN 9781927668559

For those who have followed Michael Comeau’s artistic career, *Winter’s Cosmos* will seem like a natural addition to his oeuvre. Comeau has worked for years in the printmaking and graphic arts worlds, trading in tangible visual ephemera from event posters to pop-up art installations. So it is fitting that Comeau signals at the outset of *Winter’s Cosmos*, his second graphic novel, that he will not only mobilize a similar array of promo-poster aesthetics but also bolster his visual lexicon with a foray into the filmic arrangements of images. As Comeau admits, he seeks inspiration from media that

range from “music, the wallpaper in [movies] . . . old paperback book covers, [and] dank [internet] memes.”

Even before cracking the spine of *Winter’s Cosmos*, the reader anticipates that she is entering a space reserved for a variety of media—not just comic art. The full-colour cover consists of a few motivic images from the novel framed by a black margin and centred on a cream matte, which together evoke the style of film posters. This evocation grows more explicit once the reader peruses the front matter and sees that Amy Lam and Jon McCurley are credited with playing the novel’s two protagonists, Tracy and John, just as they would be credited on screen. Digital photographs of the two models’ faces and bodies are then spliced into other images that are otherwise composed of photocopies, stock images, or drawings. The reader thus becomes aware within about the first twenty pages that Comeau is staging an interrogation of visual culture in general or, more specifically, the culture of visual information consumption.

If the primary organizing principle of the promotional poster in Comeau’s practice is collage, then that of his near-filmic structure is montage. In the former, images and objects are cut up, divested of most traces of their original form and context, and often reduced to textures, colours, or lines; in contrast, montage maintains an individual image’s recognizable meaning (what it portrays), while having a subsequent image inflect its meaning through juxtaposition.

Comeau’s design choices also allude to the beauty of the internet meme—even as belief in the value of that beauty is satirized. The meme, which is itself a tool of mockery if not satire, functions by adjusting the connotation of a given image (originally supported through the denotation of a caption) with a new caption, thereby altering the environment of meaning that the image-text unit sustains. For example, the spread of John crying conspicuously photo-shopped tears accompanied by the caption “We fucked right?” invokes the style and structure of the meme, as it divorces the various units of meaning—John, his tears, and his question—from their original contexts of production. Or, as one of the ship’s AI drones says, “*receptacle* is context” (emphasis added). Similarly, in the novel, Tracy’s microscope finds an understudy in a stand-up kitchen mixer, wall-mounted air vents are recognizably barcodes, and the ship’s engines take form in the saturated shot of a beehive, each connoting respectively production, consumption, and ecology. These examples function not so much on the basis of visual



metaphors but rather on deliberate substitutions of items that are similar in shape or texture. It is this kind of image-based malapropism that lends a tone of improvisational bricolage to *Winter's Cosmos* and creates the impression that Comeau has collected images like a *flâneur* foraging for curios in the arcades of the world-wide-webscape.

The story, scant as it is, further focuses on the intersection between literature and film by taking up tropes common to each medium's productions in the genre of science fiction. These tropes pertain to plot as much as they do to character traits, themes, and visual motifs. In what is narratively an iteration of Genesis, Tracy and John have been chosen by space-tech tycoon Theon Dekken to travel aboard his interstellar ship to the Alpha Centauri system in order to "impregnate a planet." ("Theon" is the neuter form of "god" in Greek, and "dekken" means "to impregnate" in Dutch.) This choice soon proves myopic, as not only are they unable to cooperate but Tracy must also endure John's continual and unwanted sexual advances.

By the end, in what is finally an inversion of the biblical narrative, biologist Tracy's dendrophilic tendencies amount to a frustration of John's ego, with the latter's boredom and "sense of loneliness" agitating the plot to its exilic climax. As with much popular science fiction in recent years—especially Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014) and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Aurora* (2015)—plot is not compromised for the sake of a story that fetes human triumph over natural, or even unnatural, forces. Instead, space remains not so much the final frontier to be settled but rather the border between human and non-human being.

Although there may be times when the reader is unsure what the foremost story of *Winter's Cosmos* even is, this is nonetheless to the credit of how the novel considers the notion of plot and structure. With three parenthetical peeks into the comics that John reads during the trip and one into a film that the characters watch together, *Winter's Cosmos* offers plot at the cost of story. This is similar to how irony sometimes offers a tonal, grammatical, or situational panoply of meanings but does not mean anything at all. In other words, it is the tonal outcome of bricolage's formal structure, which allows for infinite quotability but zero citability, as the individual elements cannot be traced back to their original contexts.

Irony also manifests morally as action without consequence, but the ironic meme-ishness that results from Comeau's bricolage does not extend to the novel's thematic concerns, as it cannot excuse the depravity of sexual

harassment on aesthetic grounds. This is the danger of irony's overuse, and this danger indeed applies to Comeau's treatment of sexual violence. Failure to interrogate one's own portrayal of distressing, culturally relevant content cannot be disregarded by claiming that its dismissal is the point. From a rhetorical standpoint, the consumption of humans as visual property is about as fruitfully considered as the starship's voyage is successful.

—Liam Morantz, University of King's College

A. Degen, *Soft X-Ray/Mindhunters*

Toronto: Koyama Press, 2018

392 pages, \$30.45, ISBN 9781927668535

"A world held captive?" The punctuation at the end of this question, which is one of the few lines of text in A. Degen's new graphic novel, *Soft X-Ray/Mindhunters*, foregrounds the experience of reading it: uncertainty. The novel presents a journey into the unsettling terror of the human subconscious, where nothing—not even the story itself—is easily pinned down. This is partly due to the fact that the novel is silent. Other than the title page and the section headings, there are virtually no words available to anchor the reader in the story or to aid in unravelling the plot. The silent panels also teem with visual input, and the characters are so numerous that the list of dramatis personae that appears at the beginning of each section must be constantly referred to in order to keep track of the plot. The dozens of characters that comprise the cast move erratically through crumbling cities and surreal dreamscapes. The titular "Mindhunters" are masked vigilantes who traverse crumbling, dystopian landscapes to steal multicoloured brains out of machines hooked up to wealthy dreamers who hold entire worlds hostage in their simulated realities. When the Mindhunters steal the brains running the programs, they shatter those realities and set the hostages free. But watching these technicolour dreamscapes tear apart or melt leaves one with a lingering feeling of loss and uncertainty, as the world left to these escaped dreamers ultimately lies in ruins.

The book actually consists of two separate stories—"Soft X-Ray" and "Mindhunters"—that weave in and out of each other, disconnected in time and space until a convergence point ties them together. (This point occurs at the end of the book, although it takes place chronologically before the main

plot.) The impact of all these narrative devices is that the book itself seems to resist interpretation. The reader drifts along with the characters through the dystopic landscapes and must actively construct and reconstruct the plot in the process. The pleasure of the story—or the frustration, depending on one’s preference—lies in discovering what it is really about, and that discovery cannot happen in a single reading. The “Soft X-Ray” plot in particular is deeply unsettling and confusing, and it remains largely opaque even after it converges with the much more reader-friendly “Mindhunters” plot.

Once one unearths—or perhaps constructs—as much of the plot as is possible, however, one is left with something profoundly unsatisfying and, in some cases, disturbing. The largely episodic middle section of “Mindhunters,” in which the vigilantes steal several brains while being pursued by a police officer and an assassin, is coloured by frequent outbursts of often intertwined sex and violence that make for an unsettling read, especially when the content seems to clash so profoundly with the brightly-coloured, childlike style of the art. These twists and turns into the macabre or uncanny mimic the disjointed, unsettled feeling of dreaming.

Similarly, the “Soft X-Ray” plot is packed with humanoid characters losing limbs, gouging out their own eyes, climbing out of paintings and peeling the paint off their bodies, or simply walking around only half-covered with skin. The dreamscapes frequently take sharp turns into nightmares, and the reader is left to gather together the disjointed fragments. The thematic threads of confinement versus freedom and the possibility of finding that freedom in fantasy versus reality chase each other across the pages but are never resolved. In fact, the story itself does not even have a conclusion, as the final section ends with the words “to be continued” and it remains unclear whether this cliffhanger is a promise for a sequel or merely a deliberate non-ending for a single-volume story. It ends, as mentioned before, in revealing the beginning of the story rather than resolving it, which leaves the reader with the vertigo-inducing feeling of being trapped in an unending cycle of constructing and destroying dream worlds to escape and confront a reality that will inevitably pale in comparison. Just as in the dreams the book mimics, one can run for what feels like miles through space and time and yet not move an inch.

*Soft X-Ray/Mindhunters* is a surreal reading experience that does not lend itself to being easily understood, let alone summarized. The panels feel cacophonous despite their silence, and it is often hard to know where to

look to unearth the story buried amongst the seemingly infinite cast. The project—telling a non-linear, interlaced story while simultaneously using no dialogue—is an ambitious one to say the least, and the result is something more conceptual than narrative—an exploration of the possibilities of visual storytelling as a tool for examining interiority rather than a particularly satisfying or pleasant story. While it may be violent, disturbing, and perplexing, one thing at least is certain: it is never boring.

—Shannon Payne, University of British Columbia