

BOOK REVIEWS

Cosmopolis. By Don DeLillo. New York: Scribners, 2003. 209 pages. \$39.50.

Since the appearance of Don DeLillo's loose and baggy, multi-layered epic *Underworld* in 1995, a novel that is nothing if not maximalist in its ambition and scope, America's pre-eminent diagnostician of our chronic postmodern condition has apparently determined to devote himself to works of condensation rather than dilation. To what extent this reflects a similar development in the American economy from the giddily expansive days of the mid-decade to the current climate of diminished expectations is an open question, but his last two works certainly show evidence of a desire to concentrate his narrative investments. His penultimate work, *The Body Artist*, was something like an updated Jamesian novella, a modern gothic in which language itself seems to take on the role of the uncanny spectre. And now he has produced *Cosmopolis*, a novel which, if not quite so compact, insists upon its respect for the traditional unities, taking place as it does in the course of a single day, and for the most part within the confines of a stretch limousine as it makes its way through the clogged arteries of midtown Manhattan.

The protagonist, Eric Packer, is a stock-picking *Wunderkind* who at the age of twenty-eight controls a highly successful corporation and has amassed a fabulous fortune in the process. Cocooned in his penthouse at the top of an "undistinguished sheath of hazy bronze"—a condominium-cum-condom, so to speak—"the tallest residential tower in the world," "brutal" in its "banality," he is a rather familiar DeLillian figure, a postmodern isolato, insulated from the moral and social disorder of the outside world as well as, apparently, the emotional strata of his own psyche. Having determined that the one thing needful on this day is to get a haircut, he emerges from his tower only to enter his marble-floored, cork-lined limousine where, ensconced in front of a battery of blinking monitors, "medleys of data on every screen, all the flowing symbols and alpine charts, the polychrome numbers pulsing," and accompanied by his squad of private secret-service agents running interference around his vehicle, he proceeds slowly in the direction of his childhood barbershop on the other side of town. On the way, he has a series of encounters ranging from the dotty to the Dantesque. At various points, he has conversations with his currency analyst, a twenty-two-year-old with a "beetroot red" stripe in his hair, his chief of finance, whom he meets jogging down Park Avenue, and his chief of theory, Vija Kinski, who says things like "Money has lost its narrative quality the way painting did once upon a time. Money is talking to itself." As well, he stops for a quick one-off with his middle-aged art dealer, a more complicated erotic encounter with his female bodyguard, wear-

ing her Zylflex body armour, which climaxes when, at her employer's insistence, she shoots him with her stun gun, and—strangest of all—sex with his wife of twenty-two days, the former Elise Shifrin, herself the heiress of a legendary European fortune. Then there's that thing with the plastic water bottle.

The journey itself takes unexpected turns. The President is visiting, and for the occasion a theatrical antiglobalism protest is taking place in Times Square, highlighted by a young man who sets fire to himself. Spray-painted and pissed on, the limo limps forward to 9th Avenue, where it runs into the funeral cortege of the recently deceased Brutha Fez, a Sufi rapper who had performed in a hypnotic combination of Urdu, Punjabi, and "the blackswagger English of the street." It is a pageant of barbaric grandiosity, complete with a throng of keening women in headscarves and djellabas, platoons of breakdancers, a phalanx of thirty-six limousines, and finishing up with a horde of ecstatic whirling dervishes. Finally, in the most Dantean episode in this downward journey, Packer comes upon a mass of some 300 naked people sprawled across 11th Avenue, enacting some obscure scene in front of movie cameras.

By this point one may begin to feel that this is a stretch, even in a stretch, and that although strange things do happen in midtown Manhattan, this journey is more symbolic than real. *Cosmopolis* is in fact a kind of fable. Packer's voyage is really a process of unpacking, of stripping down and excision. In the course of the day, he will lose all the varieties of body armour encasing him at the beginning of the novel—his money, his guards, and finally the magical limousine itself—the paper wealth and technological gadgetry that had kept him constantly connected to and permanently detached from the world around him. The climactic haircut, which at first looks like no more than a narrative mcguffin, by the end of the story has become the emblem of all Packer's losses this fatal day, which leave him at one point literally naked, a poor, bare, forked animal walking to meet, in a condemned building on the west side, the "credible threat" that has been shadowing him since morning.

The theme of this parable is not a new one for DeLillo. Indeed it is basically the same theme as that of the sprawling *Underworld*: a man is better than a machine. The one truly positive scene in the novel takes place in the barbershop, where Packer shares a quasi-sacramental meal of eggplant with the grandfatherly Anthony Adubato, a relic of the days before technocapitalism colonized the last refuges of the personal, and the man who gave Packer his first childhood haircut. This is a worthy theme, if not a novel one. What is ironic, however, is that there is something of a contradiction between the message and the language. If DeLillo the thinker is horrified by the dehumanization of the postmodern world, DeLillo the writer seems most energized when writing about inhuman machinery and mechanisms. His own cool unemotive style, for that matter, seems to share much with the efficient and impersonal, equally "cool," technologized world he is describing—

nowhere more so than in the stretches of characteristically depersonalized dialogue where you often have to count the lines to know who is speaking. It may not be going too far to suggest that this tension is registered in the book itself. On the one hand, the only writer in the book is a semi-crazed former employee of Packer's, who keeps a journal of his rage against the machine and his plans to assassinate his onetime boss. On the other, Packer has had his limousine cork-lined, or as he puts it "prousted," hinting perhaps at some obscure connection between the similarly detached situations of author and protagonist. Such and similar conundra will, no doubt, nourish the thriving DeLillo critical industry in years to come; for now, it is sufficient to note that the author's typical linguistic brilliance makes *Cosmopolis* an exhilarating, if brief, ride.

David Evans

Dalhousie University

Making Avonlea: L.M. Montgomery and Popular Culture. Edited by Irene Gammel. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2002. xiii, 347 pages. \$70.00.

Making Avonlea is a comprehensive, all-encompassing book on the integration into popular culture, including the adaptations and effects, of L.M. Montgomery's Avonlea texts (mainly the Anne series and to a lesser extent the Emily series). The book is effectively organized and provides a diverse range of material and approaches brought together by Gammel into a perfect fit. *Making Avonlea* is divided into three sections, which form a logical progression from background (historical and cultural), to representations and adaptations, to effects (tourism, spin-offs, and such). The first section is particularly effective and provides an excellent base for the rest of the book. The introduction by Gammel incorporates representations from each section and explains the logic behind the divisions. It also includes a list of "crucial research questions that *Making Avonlea* addresses in a scholarly fashion" (8). The list and subsequent explanations make clear the focus and breadth of the book. This introduction is geared to both the novice and the expert on Montgomery and provides a solid base for the rest of the text. However, there seems to be no clear reason for the distinction made between Canada and Quebec: "essays by scholars from English Canada and Quebec ..." (10). Why not simply classify them as scholars from Canada?

The first chapter, "*Anne of Green Gables* Goes to University: L.M. Montgomery and Academic Culture" by Carole Gerson, is also excellent and the perfect choice to begin the collection. Gerson provides the historical background for and an examination of the movement of Montgomery from pre-1970 when she was generally dismissed as being merely an author of children's literature to her gradual 'ascent' to academic acceptability. Gerson highlights a number of factors, such as the appearance of films and television

programs, that played a possible role in this change. With the discussion of these factors, Gerson incorporates into her examination the controversy between academic and popular cultures and the role Montgomery plays in it, a point later expanded on by Margaret Steffler in "‘This has been a day in hell’: Montgomery, Popular Culture, Life Writing," another informative and convincingly argued essay. While the other works in this section are all excellent and form what should be essential reading for any study of Montgomery, these two essays, as well as the introduction, are particularly strong.

The second section of the text, "Viewing Avonlea: Film, Television, Drama, and Musical," provides an in-depth examination of the adaptations made of Montgomery's works to move them into these other genres. The section includes thought-provoking arguments on both the positive and negative effects of such adaptations, with a particular focus on Kevin Sullivan's films. This section would be especially useful to those studying Montgomery from the perspective of popular culture.

The final section examines the effects of the popularity of Montgomery, such as the tourism and "spin-offs." While this section has some valuable information, it seems not as powerful as the first. The epilogue, while interesting, seems to be a rather weak addition.

Making Avonlea: L.M. Montgomery and Popular Culture is a diverse and effective collection of persuasively argued essays and should be an essential resource for those studying Montgomery's works.

Caroline Whitfield

Brock University

Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction. Edited by Edward Eden and Dee Goertz. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2003. x, 323 pages. \$60.00.

What is most striking about this volume of Shields criticism is its coherence; quite often a collection of essays, even one that converges around a single author, literary sub-genre, or particular cultural phenomenon, may only be of piecemeal interest to the reader owing to the disparate concerns or methodologies of the various contributors. As Edward Eden points out in his introduction, the essays collected here share "an important source of inspiration"(4), an address Shields delivered at Hanover College in 1996 entitled "Narrative Hunger and the Overflowing Cupboard," which comprises Section One of the volume. The presence of this controlling "source of inspiration" provides a generative axis around which the subsequent essays rotate, many alluding to Shields' comment that "language, our prized system of signs and references, frequently appears emptied out or else suspiciously charged"(24), her stated ambivalence regarding "rules about how stories must be shaped"(28), or her stern assessment that "Domesticity has not flourished in contemporary

fiction [... having] been curiously erased except in so-called 'marginal fiction,' often women's fiction"(32). Further, every essay in the volume makes reference to a contribution that comes before or after it, giving the volume an added sense of unity and dialogue.

Building on the concerns outlined in Section One, the essays collected here are chiefly about Shields' narrative engagement with the intricacies of genre (Section Two) and language (Section Three) and, although the title of the volume indicates a focus on fiction, contributions by Wendy Roy ("Autobiography as Critical Practice in *The Stone Diaries*"), Melissa Pope Eden ("The Subjunctive Mode of One's Self: Carol Shield's Biography of Jane Austen"), and Chiara Briganti ("Fat, Nail Clippings, Body Parts, or the Story of Where I Have Been: Carol Shields and Auto/Biography") are equally concerned with how Shields explores the limits of biography, its status as a form of fiction, and its impact on notions of identity, particularly women's identity. Many essays in the volume derive from an examination of the tension present in Shields' work between postmodernism and feminism; in "She Enlarges on the Available Materials': A Postmodernism of Resistance," Lisa Johnson refers to the reconciliation in *The Stone Diaries* between the playful, fragmentary, yet potentially empty decentredness of postmodernism and the necessarily material, body-oriented, yet potentially essentialist politics of feminism as a "dramatiz[ation of] the concept of *embodied postmodernism*"(202), in which the possibilities opened up by postmodernism to the newly decentred female subject allow for resistance and change (205). Johnson's related interest in Shields' "*tactile aesthetics*"(205), her reinvesting of the procedures of everyday domesticity with value, is also taken up by Roy and by Sarah Gamble, who asserts in "Filling the Creative Void: Narrative Dilemmas in *Small Ceremonies*, the *Happenstance* Novels, and *Swann*" that "those characters who express themselves through craft transcend the limitations of narrative convention and linguistic structures" (52).

Section Four of the volume is Faye Hammill's wide-ranging annotated bibliography of Shields' own corpus and critical responses to her work. The details of this bibliography reveal a bias in Shields criticism that, unfortunately, is not entirely redressed in this volume; despite Eden's affirmation in his introduction that "this collection begin[s] a critical conversation on several works by Shields that have been given short shrift"(9), the bulk of the volume, like the bulk of previous Shields criticism, converges around *Swann* and *The Stone Diaries*. Though Pope Eden's essay on Shields' biography of Austen extends the limits of what might constitute Shields' "fiction," and though the recurring focus on Shields' best-known novels does enhance the volume's coherence, the relative critical silence on, especially, Shields' short fiction still requires remedy. And, perhaps because the several essays on *Swann* and *The Stone Diaries* must take their place within a rich trajectory of extant criticism, Gamble's essay, which addresses two early Shields novels, and Dee Goertz's "Treading the Maze of *Larry's Party*" seem particularly fresh in their analytical insights that derive from wonderfully detailed close read-

ing. Still, that which might be considered absent from this volume in the way of breadth and novelty is certainly made up for by its emphasis on depth and dialogue.

Neta Gordon

Brock University

How To Be Alone: Essays. By Jonathan Franzen. New York: Giroux and Straus, 2002. 278 pages. \$24.95 US.

One cannot read T.S. Eliot's 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" without an eye on the poetry he was writing at the same time. Eliot was clearly providing a primer for his own work; *Prufrock and Other Observations* and *The Waste Land* constitute the best elaboration of Eliot's "conception of poetry as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written." In his preface to *How To Be Alone*, Jonathan Franzen sheepishly reflects back on the "very angry and theory-minded person" who wrote a manifesto on the American novel in 1996—known thereafter as "the *Harper's* essay"—and went on to critical and commercial success in 2001 with *The Corrections*. Franzen tries to convince us (and, one senses, himself) that with that essay and the others collected here, he had no ulterior aesthetic motives. Instead, he was only seeking to investigate "the problem of preserving individuality and complexity in a noisy and distracting mass culture: the question of how to be alone."

Those who have read his fiction will find this claim of separate purviews unconvincing; this is forgivable, since Franzen is largely successful in this investigation on its own. The collection's most serious flaw is that Franzen's citing certain elements of contemporary life as the principal challenges to the quest for a valuable solitude becomes, after a while, belaboured. Franzen repeatedly laments the gradual extinction of an intelligent reading public at the hands of a highly visual, media-saturated culture. In both "The Reader in Exile" and in a revised (but still rather brash) version of "the *Harper's* essay," Franzen takes solace in the existence of a small but vital community. "Readers and writers are united in their need for solitude, in their pursuit of substance in a time of ever-increasing evanescence: in their reach inward, via print, for a way out of loneliness."

Franzen's ability and willingness to be our guide in part explains the all-pervading gusto of this collection. As is the case with his enjoyable if somewhat indulgent fiction, however, he is prone to long-windedness. This tendency is not immediately apparent, since his prose is always crisp, but in long essays on the Chicago postal service, cigarette culture, and American prisons, the deeper meaning Franzen seeks to create tends to slacken from over-extended treatment of the local subject matter.

A strange quality of these essays is the writer's unapologetic and exclusive choice the first-person. Thus we learn of New York's pre-eminent status as America's metropolis through the writer's various experiences of living in and away from the city; we understand the distasteful intrusion on our privacy perpetrated by sex manuals and sex scenes in contemporary fiction through Franzen's bedroom reading. This approach works well with acceptably autobiographical essays, such as Franzen's reflection on his father's Alzheimer's or his post-*Oprah's Book Club* experience of fame and infamy. It is not needed to bemoan generally the life of the mind crowded in on by a nation that has transformed itself into the world's biggest shopping mall. At times in this smart volume, Franzen sounds too confessional and, as often happens with this mode, self-pitying: the talented writer as J. Alfred Prufrock.

Randy Boyagoda

Boston University

