BOOK REVIEWS

Carrie Fisher, *The Princess Diarist*
New York: Blue Rider Press, 2016
272 pages, $26, ISBN 9780399173592

Carrie Fisher needs no introduction. As she herself says in her new memoir, *The Princess Diarist*, "my very, very light cross to bear would always be that I would be known as Princess Leia." And so she is: one cannot imagine the *Star Wars* franchise without Leia, just as one cannot imagine Leia without "[Fisher] lurking in that thought somewhere." Even after her sudden death in December 2016, she remained with us as Leia (now General rather than Princess) in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017). I mention this because Fisher uses *Star Wars* not only as the backdrop of her memoir but also as the scaffold on which she builds her coming-of-age story.

The Princess Diarist is a bold, emotional, and often breathtakingly honest account of Fisher's life leading up to being cast as Leia as well as her experiences on and off set while filming *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977). However, it is not a light-hearted look behind the scenes of a beloved film, as there are no stories of on-set pranks or pieces of film trivia. Instead, it is an unapologetic look into the world of filmmaking, growing up, and being "the only girl in an all-boy fantasy," and it is her stark, uncomfortable, and often brutal honesty that makes the book so powerful.

During her life Fisher wrote openly about addiction, mental illness, and celebrity culture in such autobiographical works as *Wishful Drinking* (2008) and *Shockaholic* (2011)—so much so that readers might question whether there could possibly be anything more to tell. It turns out that there is quite a lot more, which she "didn't feel truly comfortable telling . . . before now." As with her previous memoirs, her writing style is also direct, unaffected, and conversational, so it's easy to forget that she is talking about something she spent decades very decidedly *not* talking about. And when she finally opens up about her affair with fellow actor Harrison Ford (who

was much older and married), she does not hold anything back.

The centrepiece of the memoir is a series of excerpts from Fisher's diary, and in a way the book is written by two different authors: the Fisher of the 1970s, who is inexperienced and conflicted, and the Fisher of the 2010s, who is removed and contemplative. Both are equally compelling, and both are far more generous towards Ford than readers might be inclined to be. She remarks: "If Harrison was unable to see that I had feelings for him (at least five, but sometimes as many as seven), then he wasn't as smart as I thought he was—as I knew he was. So I loved him and he allowed it." That is as close as she comes to condemning anyone, including George Lucas, who made her wear the infamous metal bikini in *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* (1983), and a group of crew members, who got handsy after a night of heavy drinking. Fisher has words of exasperation and irritation, but nothing close to ire: "Time shifts and your pity enables you to turn what was once, decades ago, an ordinary sort of pain or hurt, complicated by embarrassing self-pity, into what is now only a humiliating tale that you can share with others because, after almost four decades, it's all in the past and who gives a shit." I almost wished, while reading, that she had some more scathing indictments to hand out to perpetrators of the kind of institutional misogyny that continues to plague workplaces, from Hollywood to hardware stores.

Fisher's account of how she and Ford "sat among the elephants and ignored them together" for nearly forty years is uncomfortable—especially with the spectre of Fisher's death looming over it—but it isn't depressing, as she seamlessly blends stark emotional honestly with dry, often self-deprecating wit. Early in the book she asks herself, "What would Leia do?"—a sentiment to which she frequently returns, as she says elsewhere that "I could pretend I was a princess whose life went from chaos to crisis without looking down between chaoses to find, to her relief, that her dress wasn't torn." She thus calls on her alter ego for strength, as people often do when faced with seemingly overwhelming problems, and I imagine that many of her fans will relate to this desire to be as smart, decisive, and strong as Leia.

After reading this book—in which Fisher is more emotionally honest and unselfconscious than anyone has a right to expect of her—I also felt a desire to be as bold as Fisher. In the end, *The Princess Diarist* proves the point made in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015) that seems to be as much about Fisher herself as it is about Leia: "To me, she's royalty."

—Shannon Payne, University of British Columbia

J. A. Wainwright, *The Last Artist*
Charleston, SC: Custom Book Publications, 2016
210 pages, $25.76, ISBN 9781533398710

Halifax author J. A. Wainwright's fourth novel, *The Last Artist*, is a thoughtful testament to the power of art to transcend an individual life and create a lasting cultural legacy. Confronted with less than a year to live because of an undisclosed illness, the main protagonist, twenty-first-century visual artist Ben Sand, carefully prepares his last artistic statement: a series of paintings reproducing artistic masterpieces throughout history on the walls of a hidden cave in southern France. Intermixed with this primary narrative is that of An, a Paleolithic girl who breaks the gender barrier to become the first woman cave painter, as well as a series of life narratives that emerge as Sand paints the work of Pieter Bruegel, Francisco Goya, Claude Monet, Gustave Courbet, Alex Colville, Robert Rauschenberg, Bill Mason, and a statue of the Hindu goddess Parvati.

The novel questions the idea that art is the thing that lasts after the death of the artist. Does art transcend death and provide meaning, even without context? Wainwright populates his novel with artists of many types to answer this question, including opera singers, wood carvers, journalists, painters, and sketchers. All of these characters wish to be remembered for their artistic vision and their use of art to share the best of themselves with others. As they are brought together, we are reminded that art, too, is ephemeral: paintings fade and are destroyed, music ends, carvings need replacing. In order to preserve this meaning, art also needs to be protected so that it can be sustained. It is for this reason that Sand chooses a hidden cave to preserve the value associated with art.

The mix of narrative styles and time periods creates meaning through palimpsest. This layering happens across chapters and across characters. The individual chapters, which jump quickly and sometimes disorientingly across time and space, are both an interior vision of a single artist and a bringing together of multiple consciousnesses. For example, Sand's interpretation of An stems from his memories of his daughter Annie. At the same time, Annie, in some ways, is reborn in the past through An as an empowered artist with deep inner vision and a visceral, life-affirming mode of expression. The layering also happens across artists, as Sand recreates and interprets the art he has curated.

The novel's strongest feature is its ekphrastic readings of (primarily) Western art. A chapter is devoted to each of the artworks that Sand reproduces, and each of these chapters fleshes out the work into character sketches that reinforce the text's main themes. A female innkeeper in Bruegel's *Return of the Hunters* (1565), for example, seizes on the hunter's creativity to craft a new sign for her inn and discovers the value of abstract art. A shepherd protects his son from imminent death in a compelling last stand in Goya's *The Third of May 1808* (1814), while a young girl tries to understand her father's decision to die instead of give up his farm to a train company in Colville's *Horse and Train* (1954). Each of these interpretations brings a human presence to the work, giving it life beyond the intention of the artist. Given the strong Western and masculine bent of the selected artworks, the inclusion of the Parvati statue may seem somewhat anomalous. Though its presence in the novel is not tokenistic, its narrative is less fleshed-out than those of the other works because its chapter is clumsily combined with a discussion of Rauschenberg's collage *Tracer* (1963).

Perhaps the image that looms largest is Mason's *Chestnut Prospector #150* (1975), which stands in for Sand's own artwork. This painting of an empty wooden canoe adrift on the water with its paddles askew might seem like quintessential Canadiana, but its story is perhaps the darkest of all: while out with his young daughter, Sand's canoe capsizes and Annie drowns. The emptiness caused by this loss pervades the image, providing more nuance and depth with its repetition at the beginning of Sand's sections of the text.

Wainwright's novel demonstrates the various talents of its author. His careful explication of art bespeaks his scholarly training, while his carefully chosen language and distinct characterization show his chops as a poet and biographer. *The Last Artist* reassures us that art matters and that an artist's legacy lies in its appreciation through new, yet untold interpretations.

—Emily Ballantyne, Dalhousie University

Brian Bartlett, ed., *Collected Poems of Alden Nowlan*
Fredericton: Icehouse Poetry, 2017
682 pages, $55, ISBN 9780864929600

Alden Nowlan was one of the most popular Canadian poets of the past century—some even claim the leading poet of his generation. His poems are

frequently anthologized—and deservedly so. The spectre descending "from the purple mist of trees on the mountain" and its ignoble fate in "The Bull Moose" has haunted me ever since I first encountered it in grade eight and is among the most meaningful portrayals of humanity's fraught relationship with nature and the divine. The range of his talent has also been well represented in *Early Poems* (1983), *An Exchange of Gifts* (1985), and *Selected Poems* (1996). For a poet of Nowlan's stature, it seems inevitable that the bulk of his poetry would someday be gathered for posterity, although for fans the recently published *Collected Poems* has been a long time coming.

Unlike earlier selections, which remain the best introduction to Nowlan's work, this collection is clearly for fans. It is not a scholarly edition, despite the evident care with which it was prepared: the poems are not collated with the author's manuscripts or earlier printings but, in many cases, reprinted from *Selected Poems*; there are no substantive notes, textual or otherwise; the poems that were omitted because they only appeared in periodicals are not listed in the bibliography; and no rationale is provided for editorial decisions, such as the inclusion of poems published posthumously or the regularization of typography. But many readers will think all the more of it, as Nowlan wrote for the general public and fellow poets rather than pedants like "Professor Squint." And while it may not be suitable for study, a volume of this size—coming in at over six hundred pages—was never likely to attract many students anyway.

For fans, this book offers many excellent poems beyond what previous editions were able to include as well as the opportunity to revisit favourites, as Nowlan often returns to the same themes and subjects. In "Chance Encounter," for example, the speaker's feelings about a cow moose and her calf echo my own initial response to "The Bull Moose": "bursting to tell someone about the great sight I've seen, / yet not even sure why it should seem so important." The "neighbours" in that poem also receive special attention in a number of regional portraits, detailing the habits of "famous local characters," ranging from an illiterate father at the bank with his son to "The Jelly Bean Man." Like the woman in "The Terror of Thinking Myself No More a Poet," I found myself saying "I recognize everybody / in every one of your poems."

I respond deeply to these portraits because, like their author, I grew up in rural Nova Scotia and later lived in New Brunswick, meaning that I readily identify with the twin worlds of "sea salt and sawdust" with which Now-

lan was primarily concerned. But Nowlan is not exclusively a regional poet, as he often wrote about other parts of Canada and the world and strongly believed that the local is universal, which is one reason his poems remain so relatable. In "The Seasick Sailor, and Others," for example, he maintains that a writer "who works in a room no larger than a closest" can "write as well as anyone . . . about vast spaces, open spaces," and she who rarely leaves her village "will excel / in portraying men and women in society." Nor is he difficult to understand. His verse is still very accessible, partly because of its conversational mode and partly because of its unaffected diction. Nowlan avoids "serpent jargon" except on rare occasions when he employs the terms "stanchion," "puncheon," "hoydenish," "fuliginous," "atavistic," and "quinine." His tendency toward the sentimental and aphoristic should also appeal to a new generation of readers that requires only that poetry be sincere and quotable.

As the people's poet, Nowlan was the Rupi Kaur of his generation. His mantra was similar: "you write poems about what / you feel deepest and hardest." His working-class background and lack of formal education were also discussed as often as his poetry, and his eschewal of poetic norms was equally divisive. Indeed, everything that is now being said about Kaur was also once said about Nowlan. Many in the literary establishment even questioned whether he was a poet at all and not just some overhyped "hick." One objection the editor tries to preempt in his introduction, for example, is that many of Nowlan's poems would be nothing more than prose without their seemingly arbitrary line breaks. In the case of "The Day's First Miracle," he is almost certainly right, although I am less certain about "The Last Flight." Some of Nowlan's later experiments with found poetry–particularly the versification of news reports–lean toward the banal, and his diction is often pedestrian, over-favouring "ach," "ah," "huh," and "ugh." His peer, John Metcalf, uncharitably predicted that, had Nowlan continued on this folksy path, he would have ended up publishing in *Reader's Digest*.

The greatest difficultly modern readers will have with Nowlan's poetry is not its form but its occasionally vulgar content. Nowlan's carefully cultivated persona of the sensitive observer does not always date well, as many of his confessional poems openly celebrate the male gaze, and it is telling that his most ardent champion, the American poet Robert Bly, is a leader in the mythopoeic men's movement. Nowlan is capable of evoking powerful female voices, as in the moving vignette "The Red Wool Shirt," but just as

often his lyric speakers are leering old men who stalk women in supermarkets, empathize with panty thieves, peer through the dresses of adolescent girls, and hold them responsible for turning the speaker's "skull into a camera"—an attitude all the more troubling considering Nowlan's admission to nearly raping a girl as a young man. Nowlan was a master of poetic voice with an eye for character, but today's readers may not always want to hear what he has to say or appreciate his own.

—Trevor Cook, University of Toronto

Kansas Bradbury, *The Rushing of the Brook*
Victoria: Friesen Press, 2017
265 pages, $20.99, ISBN 9781525501951

Kansas Bradbury's debut novel, *The Rushing of the Brook*, is a meditation on youth and how easily one's childhood innocence can be pushed away to reveal the gritty underbelly of reality. Spanning over seventeen years, it primarily focuses on the adventures of Hayward, Joe, Pete, and Davey—four childhood friends from the city of Sifton who call themselves the "Cornflakes." Since the protagonists are only eleven at the outset, they interact with the world as if it owes them everything and they believe that they are invincible—until, of course, they are proven incorrect. Despite their naivety, however, they are often shown to be more perceptive than their parents believe them to be, which is likely because this is the truth of how many families operate: with a shared veil of trust, love, and disbelief between parent and child that keeps the latter from growing up too fast and the former from confronting the fact that a child cannot be protected at all times. Control is no longer an option, as children grow up too quickly and adapt too fast to keep their parents alongside them as guardians.

Bradbury's prose is unrefined, sometimes even jarring, but his novel makes a point about the intelligence of children. He treats his youthful characters with as much, if not more, nuance than the fully-developed adults, and his commitment to foregrounding children in a plot about murder, passion, and the drive to keep secrets presents a side to death that is all too often overlooked. Though children may be resilient, they are not unshakeable or unbreakable. A single moment can end up defining their lives forever, although the significance of that moment may not emerge until later in life,

giving them the false impression that they have worked through or overcome their grief. When the reader reencounters the protagonists as adults, it is plain that despite their actual ages they still remain children in their own minds. The love, loyalty, and friendship that bonded them becomes dormant as they attempt to muddle their way through life—finding careers, moving to different cities, getting promoted, having children, falling out of love—yet they never really move on from who they were at the tender age of eleven. Eventually, they have no choice but to confront their grief head-on, and it might just be too much for them to bear.

Though the novel's pacing and setting are somewhat formulaic and Bradbury often employs predictable tropes, the ending is not easily anticipated and well worth wading through the slower parts of the plot. There is also an intense injection of raw emotion in Bradbury's work, and his short, sharp sentences do little to ease the tension that simmers beneath the seemingly predictable plotline. The reader is ultimately unable to navigate out of a space of discomfort and disorder, and the most unsettling aspect of the novel is how unwaveringly realistic and comprehensible the characters' motivations are—even though some of them are reprehensible. Indeed, this story could easily take place anywhere, and it is this realism that makes Bradbury's novel so appealing.

—Sam Lehman, Dalhousie University