

## BOOK REVIEWS

Kateri Lanthier, *Siren*

Montreal: Véhicule Press, 2017

80 pages, \$17.95, ISBN 9781550654660

Kateri Lanthier's second collection of poetry, *Siren*, investigates society through a combination of rhythmic and free-verse prose. Reminiscent of Anne Boyer and Harryette Mullen in perspective and experimental voice, Lanthier's clever and aware poetry plays with the style of the ghazal with a fresh, witty, and bold take on historic and current events. The three sections seemingly progress from minimalistic and highly linguistically manipulative to complex, flowing stanzas with leaping thought processes. And although the poems evoke a self-proclaimed "compelling melancholy," they are also relentlessly playful and cheeky.

With vivacious and critical pointedness, Lanthier's *Siren* and Mullen's *Muse and Drudge* (1995) share an exaggerated yet playful, accusatory voice in directing attention to consumerism, environmental destruction, romantic complexities, and feminist issues. Similar to Mullen's *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T* (1992), the first section of *Siren* connects complex societal issues to everyday pains with clever wordplay and vivid images presented in a list format, as in "Period Drama": "Red weather. Mothership of pad, clips, garter belt." Through the seeming mundane and casual listing of disjointed images, Lanthier's criticisms come through in an evocative yet subtle way that challenges everyday items from a feminist perspective.

Along with the language, which suggests a deeper implied message than its superficial image, Lanthier's use of alliteration and assonance adds a highly linguistically manipulative approach to disjointed imagery: "I'm stamen and pistil-whipped, forced to bloom by heart. / Let's sew your shadow back on in the situation room [. . .] / My red lipstick: safety feature, sign of poison, bull's eye?" This combination of strange images and uniting language creates an original, refreshing approach to her lyrical poetry. Since

her disjointed poetry connects ideas through colour, tone, and assonance, Lanthier's criticisms relate with the everyday and make the normal strange. It is in her highly strange and vivid imagist wording that I am drawn to think of Mullen, yet Lanthier alone brings particular aspects that connect her poetry to a contemporary Canadian community. For example, Lanthier's references to Canadian municipalities and *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), as well as her usage of Quebecois French and her inclusion of Ontario lakeshore imagery, come together to create a broad and relatable Canadian perspective.

With variations in form and voice, Lanthier continues to surprise in each poem throughout *Siren*, and this freshness makes the book easy to read in one sitting. Many of the poems demand attention with bright and charismatic introductions, as in "Baby Grand":

But I followed instructions! *Wring blood from a stone and use the drops  
as lip gloss.*

My new job is branding mascara. This one's called "The Tracks of My  
Tears."

At the baby grand, my pearly whites dissolved to box-office poison. Sawzall,  
Adderall,  
bias-cut satin: recipe for trouble.

The use of everyday language and imagery allows for a more accessible and relatable approach to feminist issues while still maintaining the overarching themes of consumerism and societal norms.

Lanthier most successfully achieves this accusatory yet casual manner of criticism in her whimsical use of second-person narrative, as in "Chryso-prase":

With you, the dawning awareness at dusk  
of chalcedony, chrysoprase,

in the pendant your cheekbone brushed aside  
as you kissed down to my left breast's swerve.

...

Our everywhere room: hotel in Singapore, house in Thunder Bay,  
boathouse on the moon.

This pointed inclusion of the second-person perspective creates a more inclusive experience, as the reader is carried along by the specific images she draws upon, regardless as to whether or not they are personally relatable.

Lanthier demonstrates her ability to dabble in many different forms of poetry, including lyric poetry, triplet, haiku, and prose. However, her prose poetry excels in uniting disjointed images, creating a flowing, lyrical piece every time. “What Washes Off, What Sticks” particularly resonates with me because of its delicate precision in pairing casual and playful dialogue with heavy subject matter:

We need new earth, dirt bags! They’re sandbagged up at the mall. Sweet  
soil arrived  
from the countryside. Got trashed in the parkette.

...

You scrub at the stain while marvelling at what washes off, what sticks.  
A missed miscarriage. The heartbeat that skipped town but never left.

The three sections tackle very different topics, from lighthearted and subtly pointed dream narratives to gloomy nostalgic references to the greater Toronto area and captivating ordinary moments seen from a defamiliarized perspective. Amidst these playful narratives there lies an undertone of melancholy, yet what drives the reader to push through the persistent lyricism is the relentlessness with which Lanthier presents her poems and the seamlessness with which the poems flow from one to another despite the form changes and shifts in voice. The collection is thus both draining and rejuvenating; whereas the melancholy aspects would normally immerse the reader in a slow and dulling narrative, *Siren* pushes forward and insists on a pensive hopefulness.

Despite its evocative cover image, Lanthier’s work does anything but blare her messages and criticisms of society. Instead, her poetry leans on the mythological approach to the word “siren,” as she lures in her prey with seemingly sweet, witty lines—especially those with highly rich vocabulary

and alliteration. Just as the Greek creature does with her target, Lanthier's second collection wraps the reader in the most colourful dialogue and punctuation only to grab hold while she steers directly into melancholy without easing off. Summarizing the collection as enjoyable is perhaps too simplistic. Although her strange imagery and clever wordplay make her poems quick and lighthearted, they are also at times haunting, leaving the reader feeling slightly tattered yet simultaneously hungry for more.

—Kendra Guidolin, University of New Brunswick

Patrick deWitt, *French Exit*

Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2018

244 pages, \$20.56, ISBN 9781487004835

*French Exit*, a finalist for the Scotiabank Giller Prize, the Ken Kesey Award for Fiction, and the Forest of Reading Evergreen Award, is the fourth stand-alone novel by Canadian author Patrick deWitt—a writer who has gained a reputation for blurring genre lines. For example, *The Sisters Brothers* (2011), winner of the Stephen Leacock Memorial Medal for Humour and a Governor General's Award, adopts, eludes, and twists the western genre, and *Undermajordomo Minor* (2015) similarly uses and changes features of the fantasy genre. *French Exit* is an experiment with the comedy of manners genre (though it might more aptly be called a tragedy of manners), and like all his novels it is darkly comedic, both delightfully and disturbingly absurd, and brimming with witty dialogue.

*French Exit* is the tragic and melodramatic tale of a high society woman named Frances and her vague and unmotivated adult son Malcolm, who lives in her flamboyant shadow. Frances gained infamy among her Manhattan circle for finding her husband, Franklin Price, dead in his bedroom and then immediately leaving for a skiing holiday without reporting the fatality. Twelve years later, she loses her fortune due to her extravagant spending habits and sets out for Paris along with her son and their cat, Small Frank, whom they believe—without a satisfying explanation—to be possessed by the departed spirit of Franklin Price. Part one of Frances' cryptic two-part plan is to live quietly in a small flat and spend the rest of her money in frivolity. I will not spoil part two.

The plot of the novel is simple—perhaps too simple, even bordering on

nonexistent. What is more important than the plot, however, is the novel's character sketch of a woman continually at the top of the social ladder despite her utter disregard for the opinions of others and her subconscious disdain for authority figures and class divisions. Frances is a law unto herself, and the novel is driven entirely by her decisions, interests, and unclear motivations while Malcolm trails passively behind, forever in the grip of his mother's opinions. People who know, or more likely know of, Frances and Malcolm are perplexed by them, wanting to understand their behaviour and motivation and failing miserably. Relatable characters are often praised as one of the trademarks of good writing, but one of deWitt's greatest strengths is his ability to write unrelatable characters, push them to the extreme verge of absurdity, describe their immoral behaviour with an air of total nonchalance, and then redeem them with a single delightful anecdote. Despite her overbearing ways and her smothering of Malcolm, for example, Frances admits, when questioned by a friend, that although she would change Malcolm "quite a bit" she still loves him "so much it pains [her]." Part of Frances' allure is that she eludes explanation or understanding—perhaps even empathy—to the very end. Much of what she does is cruel, unreasonable, or inexcusable. She is too much a world unto herself to be relatable, and yet her story and her personality are riveting, fascinating, and strangely and inexplicably delightful.

DeWitt's absurdity works because the unexpected and bizarre behaviour of the characters is presented in a matter-of-fact way that is never questioned. For example, Frances and Malcolm believe that their cat houses the spirit of Franklin Price, and this supposition is merely accepted as fact although it is not examined in detail until late in the story. Madeline, a medium Malcolm meets on the cruise ship, claims to be able to tell when people are about to die by observing a green mist around their bodies, and no one questions this ability. The premise of the story (a rich widow losing her fortune) and the setting (the iconic cities of New York and Paris) suggest that the story should be a work of realism, yet the characters who populate this novel and the ways in which they interact with one another and respond to their own odd situations render them like images in a fun-house mirror.

In keeping with deWitt's usual dark comedy, death is a force that overshadows this novel, often infiltrating its humour. When Frances arrives in Paris, for example, she tells the customs agent, "I want to see the Eiffel Tower, then die," and the agent, perturbed, orders her, "no dying in France."

When Frances meets Mme Reynard, her first acquaintance in France, she learns that she is sitting in the very chair in which her host's husband died. DeWitt writes, "Frances suddenly became aware of the chair's dimensions. It was an exciting thing to know, and she was glad she'd been told about it." The novel thus handles death in a variety of ways—from dark comedy to discomfort to surrealism—which infuses the story with a sense of impending doom. Despite the macabre humour and preoccupation with death, however, *French Exit* eludes hopelessness. This is not a novel that requires a box of tissues. DeWitt also chooses words with such care that his prose often borders on poetry, and his attention to heartwarming details and entertaining dialogue make this book delightful rather than depressing. Carefully crafted, dark, and absurd, *French Exit* is a masterpiece unlike anything you have ever read or are likely to read again.

—Sharon Vogel, Dalhousie University

Lucas Crawford, *The High Line Scavenger Hunt*

Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2018

144 pages, \$18.99, ISBN 9781773850009

At first glance, Lucas Crawford's work comes across as the writing of a teacher-scholar-writer whose professional life is based on a set of related and often mutually reinforcing interests. In Crawford's case, a background in architecture combines with being a rural Atlantic-Canadian English professor and transgender researcher. These areas of expertise coalesced in a scholarly monograph, *Transgender Architectonics: The Shape of Change in Modernist Space* (2015). In *The High Line Scavenger Hunt*, they are alloyed with Crawford's prowess as a poet.

The book is based on LGBT histories of New York City's High Line park—a one-time railway viaduct that has been redesigned as an elevated green space. This conceit succeeds in unifying Crawford's disparate interests, as when "My Death Avenue," which begins with the words "Before the elevated High Line was built," goes on to explore the intersection of personal and public traumas:

In 2009, my fate-worse-than-Death  
Avenue is not in New York

Or maybe it is sometimes—Wall Street  
in drag as somewhere-you-want-to-be.

Sometimes, the subject matter is elaborated upon and reflected formally, with internal and end rhymes making for seemingly effortless turns of phrase like

A bottom bent over for a  
leather man wielding a whip.

A cure for his sore hip and  
his urban cowboy depression.

A minor in the history of land dispossession.

The poem, like its title (“Honey, Let’s Do Something with This Place”), piles it on a little thick, with the subsequent two lines ending on “session” and “delicatessen,” respectively. But there’s a ludic abundance here that makes the flashes of formal tightness all the more compelling.

The further one gets into the book, however, the more one notices not only this kind of exuberance but also an oddly declamatory element. Virtually everything here registers as dramatic monologue or else has some kind of textual-discursive frame narrative or template. For example, “Found: Daily Menu for the West-Side Cowboy on a Moderate Budget” features menu items that seem to function as characters in a drama, such as “FRIED TOMATOES / Slice the tomatoes; dredge on a little flour, / pepper and salt,” which is taken directly from Elizabeth H. Putnam’s *Mrs. Putnam’s Receipt Book, and Young Housekeeper’s Assistant* (1849). “First Page of an Academic Article in Drag as a Poem” is also constructed from one of Crawford’s scholarly works, featuring passages like the following:

In this succinct commentary, readers learn  
that the new High Line park’s significance  
may only be grasped through the violence  
of a specific juxtaposition with transgender;  
one cannot appreciate how far the area has come,  
apparently, until one hears about how low it had sunk.

The list goes on, with the collection cycling through a multitude of other found formats. Even the more conventionally lyric moments seem to want to announce their arrival as poems: “The High Line and I Aren’t Men,” for instance, immediately elaborates on its title, its first line reading “We both have repurposed, reused, recycled limbs.” Others, like “Blur,” begin with a direct statement of their premise or theme: “The trio of architects who reincarnated the High Line / built a structure out of steam in Switzerland.”

This is perhaps the structuring irony of the collection: despite the tightly coiled areas of knowledge and experience, what the poems put forward is not a similarly unified speaker but rather a proliferation of narrative and textual frames. The point seems to be that there’s always some additional layer of artifice, as though a poem weren’t simply a poem. Somewhere between the beginning idea of the poem and the generation of words, some kind of rigid categorization intervenes and determines the work’s shape and voice.

Coming late in the collection, the long, multi-part “I Lie on the High Line” is a litany of negated “confessions”:

I never asked a stranger to pull over his car so I could take  
a hot dump in the woods. I never took off my old white panties  
to use as toilet paper and even if I wanted to

abandon them in that forest and go home dirty-commando,  
I don’t know that I could. I never went to sex parties; I never  
broke my finger getting penetrated on a broken table.

The list gets progressively playful and lightly disorienting, with still more double negatives and redundant phrasings bending the poem’s rules: “I’ve never not purged. I did // not slice my finger off, so I never did not go to Emerg.” Ultimately, although such “confessions” might ostensibly register as embarrassments, their presence here, in the context of an overwhelmingly progressive poetry milieu that has in many respects internalized the confessional register, means that they function more as indications of insider status—a fact that the unstable nature of the negations themselves seems to acknowledge.

The collection is far from flawless—many of the poems come across as a little excessive in their number of lines, stanzas, or sections, and even some

of the shorter ones spill onto a second page when it seems like they don't need to, as if they're always trying to get a last word in. And yet, perhaps this too is part of the book's problematic, as identity itself may always be the persistently complex dialectic of the authentic and the constructed—or, in the world of *The High Line Scavenger Hunt*, the utterance of the fundamentally lyric poem and the nearly infinite series of containers that give it shape.

—Carl Watts, Huazhong University of Science and Technology

Shane Neilson and Sue Sinclair, eds., *Parallel Universe*  
Hamilton: Frog Hollow, 2018  
201 pages, \$35.00, ISBN 9781926948706

Shane Neilson and Sue Sinclair's *Parallel Universe: the poetries of New Brunswick* is a compilation of essays and reviews by various hands. A painting by Mario Doucette supplies the front cover of the book, which shows a dispersed flock of naked people equipped with wings searching a mixed forest that slopes into yellow fields. The title of the artwork, *1755 (Épilogue)*, invokes the expulsion of the Acadians by the British—an event that is remembered as “Le Grand Dérangement” (also known as the Great Upheaval, the Great Expulsion, and the Great Deportation)—and Doucette's back cover complements the front with another painting titled *1755 (Se réfugier dans la forêt)*. I would suggest that Doucette's hovering figures—too attached to the earth to be angels, too carnal to be ghosts—have not found in *Parallel Universe* quite what they were looking for, despite the indisputable tenacity of their quest. Still, they embody persistent New Brunswick impulses. To go divested of all clothing, as Doucette's stripped figures do, is to conjure, in Neilson and Sinclair's context, Alden Nowlan's famous poem “The Mysterious Naked Man.” To haunt a place is to refuse a merely empirical extinction. To retreat to the woods is not naively to return to nature, but rather to cultivate the available refuge with art and patience. To wear wings is even to assimilate oneself, in Ovidian fashion, with the migratory aptitude of birds. A Swainson's thrush may breed in New Brunswick as an authentic genius of the place, but when it plies the continental flyways it becomes cosmopolitan.

Including their own polemical introductions, Neilson and Sinclair have gathered nineteen pieces on the topic of New Brunswick verse. The col-

lected essays discuss plenty of deserving people. In rather different ways, Lynn Davies, Brian Bartlett, Joe Blades, Ross Leckie, Tony Tremblay, R. M. Vaughan, Gabriel Robichaud, and Monica Bolduc—to list only a few—truly deserve more consideration than anyone has yet publicly bestowed on them. In the present book, however, the kind and intensity of thought devoted to such figures vary and are unfortunately rarely sustained. That is not to say that *Parallel Universe* fails to offer pleasure. Danny Jacobs delivers a droll account of a Fredericton literary festival, Stephanie Yorke canvasses a swathe of writers to ascertain their relation to class (her best insights, offered by the by, relate to other matters), Jennifer Houle gives a plain account of her growth as a poet against the odds, and Jo-Anne Elder goes in search of Acadia by reconnoitring the writings of its latest artists.

Every item in *Parallel Universe* has at least one worthy insight to impart, but Neilson and Sinclair would have done better to commission discrete articles devoted to individual writers. Take Lynn Davies and Brian Bartlett, for instance—a pair of artists who, over long careers, have produced, at their best, work equal to anything composed in English-speaking Canada. Yorke brings great finesse to the three pages she devotes to Davies, yet her major motive seems to be to exempt the poet from the entirely imaginary charge of being “middlebrow.” In her four pages, Lisa Banks chooses to rebuke Bartlett for a stray remark he once made about George Elliott Clarke, yet Clarke is a poet laureate of Canada and needs no defenders, whereas Bartlett remains close to unknown. Davies’ and Bartlett’s comparative obscurity substantiates just how inequitable the apportionment of national attention has been, and their fates vindicate a choral complaint of *Parallel Universe*’s contributors: New Brunswick is largely ignored. But how does the book satisfy a deficit of attention? Frog Hollow has issued an edition of one hundred copies. In all likelihood, these copies are destined almost exclusively for libraries. University students may consult them, but not many others. *Parallel Universe* will benefit everyone involved in it by helping them to get more grants, but it will not necessarily help many more readers.

In his prefatory remarks, Neilson is ironic about attention, but he is not alone in imagining that this cure-all abides somewhere else. Sinclair’s introduction also implies that the homeland of literary publicity remains the U.S. But the metropolises are always as parochial as the provinces. There is no centre. As for Canada, Toronto has long had the habit of squandering its attention with redundant largesse on a few dismally over-exposed faces,

and the internet has laid bare a universal clannishness. Who is not raised in the provinces? As Jim Johnstone's essay incidentally proves, Frog Hollow has already served New Brunswick well with its chapbook series. *Parallel Universe* may be more valuable for hinting at what it could have been than for what it actually is.

Most of what New Brunswick writers face is identical to what writers face everywhere. Originality is often unrecognizable at first. Gatekeepers help their friends and obey fashion. They also occasionally lose their patience and succumb to fits of spite. Passing moral fads damn emergent excellence. Creative writing schools have raised writers' expectations to questionable heights while attenuating a feel for the bitterness of literary history. By exemplifying and honestly declaring conditions that obtain universally, even where mendacious or complacent power brokers might gladly deny their prevalence, New Brunswick could foster a community of prophetic intensity of the kind that Doucette's paintings promise. In this particular book, however, the assembled writers often dissipate the powers that they may have hoped to convoke.

—Eric Miller, University of Victoria