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Best Canadian Stories 2024

Lisa Moore (ed)

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Lisa Moore took an unusual tack in guest editing *Best Canadian Stories*, since nine of the 16 stories are previously unpublished. Even if you subscribe to *The Fiddlehead*, *Geist* and *Grain*, *The New Quarterly*, the newly founded *Camel* and other key stages for short fiction in Canada, you won't have had access to most of the stories published here. It may seem like Moore is awarding Oscars to movies that have not yet hit the cinema, but how many of us are completely dialled in to new Canadian short fiction? And how many are better placed than Moore to select for us? A regular selectee in the *Best Canadian Stories* series and the author of three story collections, Moore is a professor in Memorial University's creative writing programme. She is also the author of "A Beautiful Flare," the finest story ever written about selling running shoes. Previously published in *The Walrus* as "The Shoe Emporium," this story gives the "Brannock foot measurer" its rightful place in Canadian literature.

In her introduction Moore says, "Sometimes I chose stories I'd read though they hadn't yet been published, because I wanted rural voices as well as urban ones; I wanted voices that were new" (10). And so on. Mercifully, the d-word ("diversity") doesn't appear, so there is little sense that authors have been chosen because they are "diverse" rather than that they happen to be diverse.

There is a lot of snow in these stories. Beth Downey's "The Bee Garden" contains the line "No depth of snow could hamper their joy that winter" (104). Here, pregnancy hopes and deceptions intertwine with bees and gardens, with attempts to control nature. Given that many of the stories are set in eastern Canada, where real snow falls, all this white stuff should come as no surprise. Allison Graves's "Ceiling Like the Sky" begins "One hundred centimetres of snow fell and our house was completely buried" (109). The tale is a wry spin on young people living in a rented house, and is worth reading for this gem alone: "Franny was the type of person who believed that when she gave advice, people were going to take it" (112). Is it possible to read those words without thinking of someone we know?

Michelle Porter's superb "Luck Is a Lady" also ignores the frequently offered advice to never start with the weather – "Her first thought was that the flashing lights meant her street would be cleared and salted by morning, that she'd been lucky and wouldn't have to risk death just to drive off the bloody hill their rental had been built on, halfway up and halfway down" (153). The protagonist's second thought is of money. Porter reminds us that snow is democratic; it falls upon the rich and the poor, "upon all the living and the dead" (to quote James Joyce). But the better-off don't have to worry about having to pay a fine for a tow, or have to face the fact that they "couldn't pay the fine and groceries both" (153). Impoverished herself, Porter's hero delivers care packages to the needy, including to one not-so-needy elderly man who claims to have a winning lottery ticket.

Moore says, "sometimes I wanted stories that unfolded in the future" (11). Sharon Bala's "Interlopers" unfolds in the past among a famous and moneyed coterie we'll recognize. Virginia Woolf visits her artist sister Vanessa, now married to the art critic Clive Bell, "a man incapable of originality. Instead, he parroted the ideas of his betters, passing their opinions off as his own" (21). Bala nails the icily intellectual tone of these Bloomsbury celebrities, including their snobbery towards those less well-off: "Lord how the working classes enjoyed their melodramas, Virginia said [….]. And they joked about it all the way back, taking it in turns to mimic the shopkeeper and his customer" (35).

Short stories in an anthology are necessarily in conversation with each other, if only through juxtaposition. Directly following Bala's tale of Bloomsburians on vacation is Gary Barwin's grotesquely comic "Golemson," about a twin made of clay who impregnates the narrator's ex-wife. Bala is brilliantly cool in her control of voice; Barwin's sparkling prose teeters on the edge of chaos: "All the golems, from those in the Bible to those in Reb Loew's Prague, were Claymation palookas with no more wit than a brick. But they had life" (50). The narrator's golem lurks about Toronto and is more fecund than some true sons of Adam – "I've met some breadboxes more capable of love than many of the misfortune-moulded walking Freud couches I've encountered" (46).

Billy-Ray Belcourt's ten-page "One Woman's Memories" is up there with the other works I have read by this literary luminary. A mother calls her son and tells him "I want to talk to you about my past" (58) – a past of fluid sexuality at the "mission" (glossed by Belcourt as "the colloquial way people refer to one of the residential schools" (59)), of marriage and of personal history under colonialism. The son, Paul, experiences "a pang of shame" (58) as he realizes how little he knows about his own mother.

"I wanted this collection to stretch over a large body of land and contain as many voices as I could jam in" (11), writes Moore. In this she has been successful. Madhur

Anand's "Insects Eat Birds," about an "Ornithology Museum Specialist," delights in taxonomy and Linnean classification ("Sturnus vulgaris" and "Pavo cristatus"), and in the names of fancy food ordered by a creep ("*oeuf croustillant*, *fenouil croquant*, *crème et chips d'ail*") (13). Scientific disinterest seemingly spells away natural beauty: "The iridescence of the peacock's tail is generated not by pigments but by optical interference" (13). But such descriptions cede to plain words as Anand shows this museum world is not a world apart. Despite her training and expertise, the specialist is not allowed to "skin" dead birds – "she can count on one hand the specimens she has been asked to skin since she has worked there, and even then she must use Wayne's initials to enter them into the database" (15). That Wayne "wears a cowboy hat at all times" (15) makes him look like a comic relic, appropriately placed in a museum basement.

For this reviewer who grew up speaking in a Canadian vernacular and accent (what Northrop Frye called the "monotone honk"), Lue Palmer's "Wata Tika Dan Blood" wins for freshness of voice. The first sentence: "'He come to sin on Sunday. He running from one woman's house, and breaking heads wherever he go. Wicked,' say the first, Winsome." Did I entirely understand what was going on in the story? No. Did I read it three times, with pleasure? Yes. Did I catch myself reading or honking aloud? Yes.

Joel Thomas Hynes's "Nothing But a Legacy" falls into the realist tradition as a child narrator plays crazy "eights." "Mom is gone down the harbour for the bingo games" (116), perhaps to avoid the drinking and suffocating air of the house. (I can't help imitating my aunt from Deadman's Bay, NL, when I read that sentence.) The child keeps track of cards as well as of beer consumed, ominously remarking "when [Dad] takes his last sip, before the bottle touches back down on the table, I'll be already to the fridge and back again with number six. That's how fast I am. But then that's it for our game, once the beer is all gone" (116). Realism often gets a bad rap among critics because it is too formally conservative and not of our time. But it can move us.

Two stories deal with the death of a parent and with woes of the heart. In "Ghosts," Ryan Turner captures the awkwardness of random encounters at airports as he runs into someone that he used to know: "'How are you?' I ask, and she describes how she's been trying to live without any form of plastic" (177). Turner also captures the grim prospects of academia in the new millennium: "When she asks what I do, I describe the politics of the university where I teach English. I don't mention that the job is sessional, or that I have a second job doing science-themed parties for children on the weekends" (179). The world may be small, but it's not the whimsically irreal Small World of David Lodge.

"Love Cream Heat," by Corrina Chong, also portrays a reunion as two siblings run back to Saskatoon after the death of their father. Mother has turned partly blue because she applied a "perfectly safe" (93) product used by Gwyneth Paltrow; she also wants to donate her late husband's antelope trophy to Goodwill, prompting her

grown-up daughter Louisa to explain "Mom. Poor people don't want Dad's dead animal heads" (83). While back in her hometown, Louisa reconnects with her first boyfriend, Michener, and we notice that we can go home again but we are not always in control of our memories.

Another story focused on a young woman, told however in the first person, is Sara Power's "The Circular Motion of a Professional Spit-Shiner." Power capably juggles miming, being a soldier, and proceeding through the ranks at Kingston's Royal Military College. In the first few lines, the "recruit" student Joyce receives a care package from Dad ("Congrats! You made it through first year, xoxo. Oreos, Oh Henry! bars, Skittles." (166)). The story evokes the comradery and close friendships of university days, and how "the harmony was disrupted" (171) by a slightly older soldier.

Elise Levine is no stranger to the Best-of series, having appeared twice before. Her story "Cooler," told in the first person and primarily in the present tense, takes us into a casino where the young narrator's job is to make sure that the house's profits are maximized. When they aren't, "when a player runs serious hot" (121), the cooler's job is to throw them off their game, through chitchat and distraction – "Strike up an unassuming convo with the rocketeer and dampen the sparks. Not that I'm cheating or distracting – my mere presence does the trick" (121).

My favourite author biography is of Caribbean-born Newfoundlander Xaiver Michael Campbell, who "feels that living in Jamaica prepared him for life on the Rock. Minus the snow, sleet, and lack of sun" (210). His "Pitfalls of Unsolicited Shoulding" depicts a world of raging hormones: "There is a scientific name for my sensitivity to smells. Olfactophilia or osmolagnia. You can take your pick. Aromatic, musty, sweaty odours make me stupid. I am an active pheromone sensor. Sniff sniff. Smiles. But sometimes it's sniff sniff, yikes" (64). The narrator doesn't quite cruise at the gym, among the weights and "bulbous thighs" (68) of fit men, so much as succumb to them, like a vampire's victim.

Sourayan Mookerjea's "Long Haul" has two firefighters racing to save a town from nuclear disaster. Unlike many a scifi tale, the race is described in slow beats: "Instead, floating in a void, the spider legs and torso of a chandelier bejewelled with sparkling teeth and flashbulb eyes burst into fireworks and swayed gently, though they felt no trace of a breeze in the glacial smoke" (133). As flames surround the two heroes, Mookerjea takes us into their minds and mouths: "The taste of metal in her mouth was so strong now that when she told them what she had glimpsed through the elevator window, unintelligibly and unbelievably, she couldn't tell if she wasn't able to speak, her mouth moulded into some bit of metal, or whether they couldn't hear her through the clattering din of the falling elevator" (143–44). This twisting of genre conventions – no snappy Vonnegut– or Bradbury-esque sentences here – blurs the line between what could be imagined and what could be real. For the first few pages,

I was certain this was a description of the 2016 wildfire that engulfed Fort McMurray. But then the roses appeared.

Because the stories are arranged alphabetically, Ian Williams gets the final word. "Bro" is a satire of white guilt or racial fetishism that is a joy to read. "Greg," we learn, "was on a mission to make a Black friend but there weren't many, any, Black people where he lived" (198). Eventually Greg kind of succeeds, saving "his new friend's number under Bro" (201). Greg is an idiot who could take his place beside the bigoted uncle who makes ants populate your undies at Christmas dinner. Even for a white guy, Greg is not pretty fly. Here I speculate, but "Bro" seems to be a harbinger of Williams's upcoming Massey Lectures. This year, Williams will join the ranks of Margaret Atwood, Noam Chomsky, Martin Luther King Jr., and Thomas King in delivering five lectures around Canada. His topic? Conversations. On CBC's Q, Williams recently noted that "We're living at a point now where we can barely talk to each other." Perhaps Greg is not such a fool after all. At least he tries.

"The Best Canadian Stories series," Moore remarks, is "a core sample, a mark of the years that we cannot really know the full significance of without hindsight" (11). Few of these stories feel particularly of their time or particularly "topical." This is not a critique. 2023 was a rough few years…