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What I've Been Reading

Running the Whale's Back, edited by Andrew Atkinson and Mark Harris, Goose Lane Editions; *White Eyes* by Larry Gibbons, Breton Books; *Me and Mr. Bell* by Philip Roy, Cape Breton University Press; *The Manager* by Caroline Stellings, Cape Breton University Press



This article is a collection of reviews consisting of the books I've been reading over the past few weeks. A word of caution: the reviews are offered in no particular order, and there is, in many cases, virtually nothing to link one book to another, other than the fact that the first two are collections of short stories, while the last two are promoted as novels for “young adults.” Linking any one of these books to another, though, is at best misleading. These are four very different books.

Forgive me; I am something of an eclectic reader.

I'll begin with two books that are of the sort all-too-often overlooked by many readers: collections of short stories. Perhaps with Alice Munro's recent prize for her work in the short story field this will change, but in my experience most readers encounter short fiction while enduring courses in English literature, and rarely return to them. This is unfortunate, since there are some very good short story writers at work today.

The first collection I'd like to consider is *Running The Whale's Back*, an anthology of Atlantic Canadian writing published by Goose Lane Editions. The collection is subtitled “Stories of Faith and Doubt from Atlantic Canada,” and Editors

Andrew Atkinson and Mark Harris have, as the subtitle suggests, put together a collection of short stories where belief and doubt are prominent themes. In most of the stories, the characters go through some kind of pain; their beliefs are challenged, their faith is put to the test, and they go through (sometimes ghastly) experiences that leave them fundamentally changed—and not always for the better. In some ways, this collection is a bit of a risk for Goose Lane. It is not at all uncommon for our neighbours in “Upper Canada” to assume that the Maritimes are somehow more religious than the rest of the country—perhaps this is the result of judging us based on too many postcards featuring quaint white churches overlooking neat rows of bungalows, possibly with a potato field or fishing boats off in the distance; I’m not entirely sure, but certainly the assumption, however inaccurate, is there. Yet despite the suggestion on the back of the book that the stories deal with “rough hewn, weather-beaten accounts of spirituality and religion,” there is precious little proselytizing to be found in its pages; instead, we have stories that deal with community, with death, with love, and with endurance. Sheldon Currie’s “The Accident,” for example, is a masterful representation of an entire community that subscribes to a particular religious tradition, but it neither condemns nor endorses any particular brand of faith; instead, the story is deeply personal, introspective, and insightful. It just happens to be set in a particular place, at a particular time. Similarly, Ann Copeland’s “Strange Bodies on a Stranger Shore” has religious faith at its core, but rather than adopting a particular dogmatic system of belief, we are presented with characters whose entire system of belief—religious and otherwise—is challenged, questioned, and ultimately reinforced. With few exceptions, this collection is not of religious stories, but instead consists of stories where religion or faith of one sort or another is simply part of the fabric of the culture. Come to think of it, perhaps those postcards are not that far off the mark. In any case, this is a fine collection of stories by a wide array of talents, and it is exceptionally well done.

The second collection of short stories I’d like to consider is, like *Running the Whale’s Back*, is somewhat regional in nature. Larry Gibbons’ *White Eyes* is a collection of sixteen short stories

about a white man living with his girlfriend on a Nova Scotian Mi'kmaq First Nation Reserve. This is, interestingly enough, something Gibbons did himself. The stories in this collection are far removed from those in *Running the Whale's Back*, but this is not to suggest that they are without merit, or that they are somehow inferior. They are different, but they are definitely worth reading.

One of the things that I enjoyed very much about this collection was its narrator, Calvin. He moves to the Reserve with a woman a few years younger than him, and he does so for reasons that are not entirely motivated by romance, nor are they completely admirable. He is, at least in part, motivated by reasons of financial gain. Gibbons' protagonist is not exactly a model of virtue. Yet gradually, Calvin realizes that most of the things he thought he knew about First Nations peoples are not just off the mark—they are completely wrong.

The stories give us Calvin from a variety of perspectives, and the thing I find fascinating about the gradual construction of this character is how carefully things are revealed about him: we are given Calvin the neighbour, who helps push a stuck truck out of a ditch; Calvin the outsider, who turns to alcohol to deal with the sense of alienation that pervades his life on the Reserve; Calvin the somewhat less than ideal husband, who seems unsure as to what his place within his marriage, let alone his community, might be; and many other versions of this character. Throughout it all there is enough comedy (sometimes bleak, sometimes heartfelt, but never far from the narrative as a whole) to keep us entertained and to stave off the grim reality of life on a Reserve. Gibbons strikes a perfect, if uneasy, balance between comedy and tragedy, and he successfully maintains it throughout the collection. I enjoyed reading it very much, and look forward to future work by this author.

The next title that I worked through was one that I kept putting off, and I did so for the simple reason that it falls into the "Young Adult" genre, one that I generally detest. I rarely enjoy reading fiction of this nature. Perhaps this is because in recent years I have come to equate such books with boy wizards, sparkling vampires, or adolescents engaged in televised fights to the death. This is not to suggest that there are no books in this

genre that have captured my attention—I have fond memories of the time I spent going “there and back again” with Bilbo Baggins, of adventures with Little Willy and Searchlight in *Stone Fox*, and, more recently, of reading Jonathon Stroud’s *Bartimæus* trilogy to my daughters. There are some fine examples of books for children out there. Yet for the most part I find them too saccharine, too unashamedly *sweet* and deliberately inspirational for my taste.

The formula most of these books follow—and there most definitely is a formula—is fairly standard. Offer the reader a young protagonist with whom a child can identify. Next, introduce conflict of some sort (preferably in the form of a villain who is of the evil stepmother or class bully variety), and gradually bring about a resolution that has far too much in common with the last reel of *Rocky*. There is no magic in stories of this nature. They are formulaic, trite, and all too predictable.

This is why I was pleasantly surprised when I began reading Philip Roy’s most recent novel, *Me & Mr. Bell*. Roy’s story ignores the tried and true, watered down, predictable *bildungsroman* format that has become the norm for fiction of this sort, and its departure from convention results in a something that is both eminently readable and decidedly memorable.

The novel is about Eddie MacDonald, a ten year old boy from Baddeck, Nova Scotia, but as the title implies it also features Baddeck’s most famous resident, Alexander Graham Bell. As the novel opens, Eddie struggles to read and write, and is pigeonholed as a substandard student who is destined to become a farmer—he simply lacks the skills, he is told, to amount to anything else. Yet we learn that Eddie is decidedly intelligent, even if he is unable to demonstrate this to the adults around him. He ponders the complexities of language, and wonders “why was the word *hurry* spelled with a u and the word *worry* spelled with an o when they sounded the exact same?” As readers, we understand that this genuine curiosity is the sign of a gifted mind, but to the adults around him, Eddie is nothing more than a child who struggles with language, and who has difficulty learning to read and write. It’s his discouragement with being judged in this way that leads him to meet Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor, who

Eddie's father calls the smartest man in the world. It is difficult to give too much more detail about the relationship between the two without robbing the story of its pleasure, but suffice it to say that the book is worth the read—it's a definite improvement over much of the young adult fiction currently in bookstores, and I would not hesitate to give it to my own children.

The final book I'd like to consider here is *The Manager*, by Caroline Stellings. I must confess that at first I suspected that I was facing yet another formulaic young adult title, and that I came very close to simply dismissing the book based upon its cover. Yes, I am fully aware the old cliché regarding books, judging, and covers—but a novel intended for adolescents with boxing gloves gracing the cover was, shall we say, not encouraging. I envisioned a diluted version of *The Karate Kid*, or perhaps a kid-friendly version of *Raging Bull* with the best parts of the movie replaced with the worst parts of junior high school. I am pleased to report that it only took a chapter to change my mind. This is a fine book.

The story centres on two sisters, Ellie and Tina, who live in an apartment above their father's boxing gym in Sydney, Nova Scotia. Tina is obsessed with boxing, and to complicate matters she suffers from achondroplasia, a genetic disorder that gives her very short limbs—hardly an ideal condition for an aspiring pugilist. In common parlance, Tina is one of the “little people,” but we learn early on that she despises this label.

Ellie and her sister learn of an experimental surgery that could lengthen Tina's limbs, and she has the chance to get this operation for free; all she has to do is make her way to Boston. The sisters hitch a ride with a family friend, but on the way they stop in Halifax. There, the two meet Jesse Mankiller, a Mi'kmaq light-heavyweight boxer. Through a series of (highly contrived but endlessly amusing) events, Tina becomes Jesse's manager, and the three of them continue their trip to Boston. Along the way, they encounter Irish mobsters, a family of hillbillies, and a series of plot twists that are at times heart wrenching, and at other times uproariously funny.

Throughout it all, we come to admire both girls, but for very different reasons: Tina's determination to overcome adver-

sity is balanced with growing self-confidence and self-acceptance; Ellie's compassion and self-sacrifice are balanced by an iron will and a sharp wit. We come to care deeply for both characters.

Yes, there are elements of *The Karate Kid* in this book, but they, like much of the plot, are secondary: this is a novel about growing up, but it is also a novel that engages, entertains, and one that offers a message of tolerance and self-acceptance, and it does so through a very satisfying ending. I highly recommend it.