

salonbooks

Floating between the greys and rising sun



MICHAEL HIGGINS
MYSTERIES & MYSTICS

It was a curious discovery and a rich one. I had just finished teaching a graduate course in Vancouver on the psychologist and spiritual writer Henri J.M. Nouwen and one of the lectures dealt with his understanding of the life and work of his compatriot, Vincent van Gogh. Nouwen's most popular course at Yale University was on Vincent – his art and his spirituality. Nouwen's insights provided a unique aperture into his own theological and psychological travails.

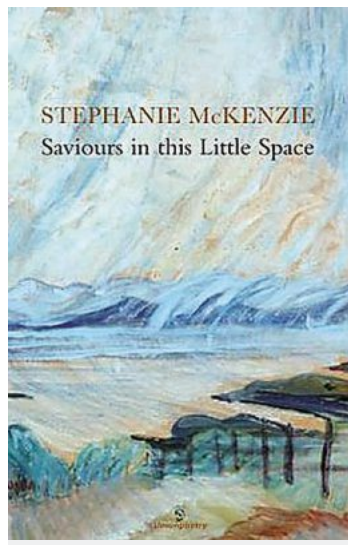
A few hours before boarding my plane back to Connecticut, I decided to revisit the Vancouver Art Gallery – in particular the Emily Carr collection. As I was leaving, I happened upon a small stack of books near the door in the gallery bookstore. The cover drew my attention but the contents are more than compelling; they are epiphanic.

Stephanie McKenzie, a British Columbia native now teaching English at Memorial University's Grenfell campus in Corner Brook, N.L., has had a long and creatively nurturing attraction to both the 19th-century Dutch artist van Gogh and the Canadian writer and painter Carr. Her approach – both academic and poetic – bears close attention.

McKenzie manages to find spiritual and artistic alignments in places dark and luminous. Of their respective struggles with lucidity, breakdown and depression she notes: "Do not house me in diagnoses, medical practitioners'/ affairs. Or maddened airs. If one day writers gather round/ searching my mind, tell them truth is only/ in my paintings." (*Floating Between the Greys and Rising Sun*)

Although the above poem is about Carr, the van Gogh resonances, parallels and personal convergences of mind and spirit are adroitly and obliquely suggested. This is what poetry does; it paints a mental landscape of connections.

In an illuminating afterword,



Saviours in this Little Space for Now: Poems for Emily Carr and Vincent van Gogh by Stephanie McKenzie, Salmonpoetry, 83 pages

McKenzie, determined to ensure that the poetic voice retains its immediacy and discrete integrity, provides a prose exposition of the synchronicities and convergences that enrich and reward a second reading of the poems. Misfits, solitaries, obsessive, emotionally conflicted and profoundly sympathetic to the marginalized, both van Gogh and Carr can be seen as spiritual voices in their time. McKenzie observes:

"Son of a clergyman and an aspiring preacher himself, van Gogh never seemed to leave his faith in God behind. And although Carr would severely question Christianity, most notably the missionaries of her day who attempted to proselytize amongst the Native populations of B.C., she, too, maintained a belief in her Christian upbringing, especially when the leading artists of her time embraced theosophy and she could not pin that philosophy to any specific kind of deity or meaning."

The artists come together in the poet's imagination in time and space: "none can dispute you were lonely. I have grown/ more lonely, too. In your presence. Today, writing of you/ from B.C., the sky, overcast, does not afford/ one single flower." ("Van Gogh Painting Sunflowers (after Gauguin)")

Saviours in this Little Space for Now is a surprising treasure. §

Michael W. Higgins is vice-president for mission and Catholic identity at Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Conn. He is a former president of St. Thomas University.

Rakoff's haunting legacy

Some 5,000 years ago, ghosts roamed the ancient shores of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what was then the land of Sumer. At the moment of death, when one's heart stopped, it was believed the living spirit dissociated from the body, losing its emotional and intellectual properties, becoming like air, roaming hungrily and angrily among the living, a danger to its relatives. In order to enter the netherworld, the deceased's family had to follow funerary ritual and the ghost would depart.

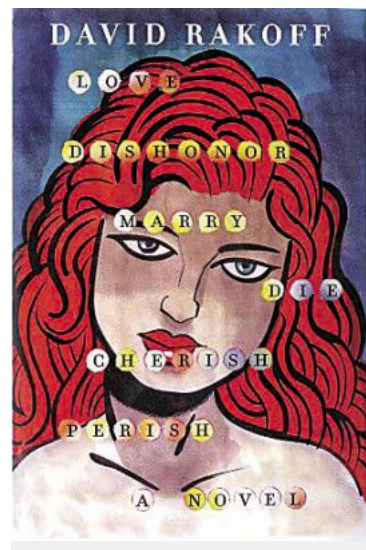
That such a conception of ghosts exists in humanity's earliest writing says much about who we are. The moral here is we have a supernatural obligation for kindness, not to neglect those around us, especially those that cannot help themselves.

It's these ghosts that haunt David Rakoff's remarkable novel, *Love, Dishonor, Marry, Die, Cherish, Perish*. Completed just before he died of cancer a year ago this week, it was to be Rakoff's first and last novel. Famous for his radio work, magazine articles, essays and screenplays, Rakoff's debut novel is like no other, written entirely in anapestic tetrameter a la *Yertle the Turtle* and *Don Juan*.

It's easy to get hung up on the novelty of Rakoff's verse – mind-boggling in its wit, humour and heart. With such rigid constraints it is all-too-easy to have content bend to fit the form, just frivolous fattening. But Rakoff wastes hardly a word, each rhyme an image or phrase brilliant in its breviloquence. I won't even give you an example, because I could neither choose just one or restrain myself from providing example upon example.

But why the rhyming at all? The device is a scrim, obscuring Rakoff's cast of misfits, broken hearts, failures and forgotten. A number of these characters, if not all of them, at some point describe themselves as ghosts. Indeed, it's not only in their fictional reality that they drift, but Rakoff's verse too relegates them to the status of shades.

And it's here where Rakoff's ingenuity lies, not in his talent for rhyming. Because despite the ability of the verse to create caricatures, what Rakoff writes are characters that, through his kindness, resonate beyond the verse.



Love, Dishonor, Marry, Die, Cherish, Perish: A Novel by David Rakoff, Doubleday, 128 pages

Like ancient Sumerian ghosts, Rakoff's incredible insight into the loneliest parts of the human condition offers solace to these people for whom life has all but been emptied.

"... central to living/ A life that is good is a life that's forgiving/ We're creatures of contact, regardless of whether/ to kiss or to wound, we still must come together./ Like in *Annie Hall*, we endure twists and torsions/ For food we don't like, and in such tiny portions/ But, like hating a food but still asking for more/ It beats staying dry but so lonely on shore."

Pick up *Love, Dishonor, Marry, Die, Cherish, Perish* for Rakoff's genius; adore it for his heart and humanity. §

Mike Landry is the *Telegraph-Journal's* arts and culture editor: landry.michael@telegraphjournal.com.

Hooking by Mary Dalton, Véhicule, 72 pages



With precision and tradition, Mary Dalton hooks a tapestry of poetics befitting a beautiful rug. Her fifth collection of poems is a book of centos, dedicated to the makers, from the poets to the artisans, who craft and create.

Dalton subtly charts the metaphoric historiography of hooking, a tradition evolving from long winters and slim resources, usually consisting of burlap, a wood-handled metal hook and scraps of fabric. In Dalton's case, hooking takes on a meta-poetic connotation. Her book of centos hooks verses and passages from hundreds of poets, repurposing lines from thousands of previously published poems.

Cloth, the opening poem of the collection, consists of the seventh line of 18 poems; including Talvikki Ansel's *Xylem*, Daniel Hall's *After Reading*, Kevin Craft's *Birches*, among others. Dalton writes, "The fog won't lift tonight – / but now we are alone with it and know / a piece of cloth was lost beyond the line."

In *The Old Masters*, Dalton writes, "A rim of night around it/ the old masters, the old sources – / a mossy floor, almost colourless, disappears/ I lean watching the detail." For this stanza alone, Dalton cites: Anne Stevenson's *In the Orchard*, Adrienne Rich's *In the Evening*, Thomas Kinsella's *Wormwood*, and William Carlos Williams' *The Sadness of the Sea*.

Dalton's source list is just as fascinating as the poems themselves. She cites everyone from Elizabeth Bishop to Rainer Maria Rilke, almost as a meditation on reading and how each poem we encounter becomes another poem. §

Shannon Webb-Campbell for the *Telegraph-Journal*

New Brunswick's reading

Fiction

- The Secret Keeper** by Kate Morton (Simon & Schuster)
- Casual Vacancy** by J.K. Rowling (Hachette)
- White Princess** by Philippa Gregory (Simon & Schuster)
- Light Between Oceans** by Neil Gaiman (Simon & Schuster)
- Inferno** by Dan Brown (Random House)
- Eye of God** by James Rollins (HarperCollins)
- Beautiful Day** by Elin Hilderbrand (Hachette)
- The Fault in Our Stars** by John Greene (Penguin)
- Divergent** by Veronica Roth (HarperCollins)
- Legend** by Marie Lu (Penguin)

Non-fiction

- Historic Saint John Streets** by David Goss & Harold E. Wright

(Nimbus)

- What to Expect When You're Expecting** by Heidi Murkoff (Thomas Allen & Son)
- Orange is the New Black** by Piper Kerman (Random House)
- Saint John Curiosities** by David Goss (Nimbus)
- Lean In** by Sheryl Sandberg (Random House)
- Cooking Light** by Bruce Weinstein (Time Home Entertainment)
- Younger Next Year for Women** by Chris Crowley (Thomas Allen & Son)
- Let's Explore Diabetes with Owls** by David Sedaris (Hachette)
- The Spark** by Kristine Barnett (Random House)
- Wheat Belly** by William Davis (HarperCollins)

Bestselling books this week at Indigo – East Point; East Point Centre, 41 Fashion Dr., Saint John, 693-6987.

Turning a bully into baked goods



JAY REMER
the etiquette guy

Dear Etiquette Guy,
"I am in a bit of a dilemma. My stepson was having trouble with a particular child in his class during the school term and now, with summer activities in full swing, they're in some of the same groups, and the bully was really

having a go at my youngster. I decided to step in, but not in the usual way. One Saturday afternoon, I invited Bully Boy, as I named him, to get to know me, on his own, in my home. I called his mother and asked if it would be OK to get acquainted with her son quietly, on our own. With a bit of hesitation, she agreed.

"On the chosen day, my stepson was going to be away, so Bully Boy and I could spend a few hours hanging out. On my agenda was chocolate chip cookie baking. I figured, since my little guy liked to help, this high-energy classmate might like to use his hands for something other than punching. Fast-forward through our afternoon and I learned something – this kid loved baking – reading the recipe out loud, checking the measurements twice and sneaking in more chocolate chips, but not without a mischievous grin. Clearly this boy was enjoying the attention, and said he was really having fun. Was I onto something?"

"After we washed up all the mixing

bowls and spoons, we sat down and had cookies and milk. It was clear Bully Boy was very pleased with himself – the sullen face that greeted me earlier was replaced with a big smile and sparkling eyes. In a few short hours, he became Baker Boy! I packed up a dozen of his cookies in a brown paper bag to take home to share. He asked if he could come back again because he had so much fun. What to say? I told him I would call his mother.

"My question is: would it be overstepping if I invited him for another baking date? Perhaps including his mother? My worry is that he might get too attached to me and I'd be faced with two problems – my stepson might become jealous, or this boy's mother might think I'm interfering/overstepping.

"From my perspective, I see potential in a few more dates with my new little friend – in the vein of paying it forward. His accomplishments on our baking day may be just the thing to propel him into more positive situations where he realizes that

he doesn't have to bully to get what he wants or needs. I'm thinking pizza dough next. Then he could have his own pizza-making party at his house.

– The Cake Lady"

This is indeed a heartwarming story and needs to continue. Cake Lady should invite this young man over when her stepson is home and the two boys could experience teamwork in the kitchen. Perhaps they will discover that their strengths can compliment each other rather than one being "better" than the other.

I have experienced bullying on many levels over many years. It is painful to endure and, in the end, has no benefit. Bullies learn this behaviour at home initially and it often goes unchecked at school and continues through life. Bullying is decimating the bottom line of many companies today.

It is a golden opportunity when you can redirect this considerable energy in a healthy way. Establishing relationships with peers at an early age is critical to

maintaining a civil society.

I well remember, as a child, experiencing the transformation of taking back my power, at the knee of the mother. A friend of mine, who was well aware of the bullying I was experiencing in my own house, would visit every afternoon on my way home from school. I would have a Coke and we would chat. I came to realize that I wasn't really the weak person I had been belittled to believe. I had value and my feelings were valid.

I recently gave a talk where this friend, now more than 80 years old, came to hear me. I referenced her act of kindness publicly, and you could have heard a pin drop. People do relate to these stories because we all have experienced them. Whether it is at home, at school, in a relationship or in business, it's never too late to address this dynamic. §

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