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Great Pasticheurs

Ian Rae, *From Cohen to Carson: The Poet's Novel in Canada*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2008. x + 390 pp.

In a 2000 *Globe and Mail* review of Anne Carson's *Men in the Off Hours*, Carl Wilson asserts that "Carson's writing is without precedent in Canada" because of her exceptional ability to break down the barriers that have traditionally existed between literary genres (qtd. in Rae 260). In a *New York Times* review the following year of Carson's *The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos*, Daphne Merkin echoes Wilson's assessment, referring to Carson as "one of the great pasticheurs" because of the skilful blend of poetry and prose she uses to structure her works (qtd. in Rae 260). For Merkin, this characteristic makes Carson's work "thrillingly new," and she even goes so far as to recommend that Carson's "fellow poets" stand up and take notice of her unique and unparalleled achievement in contemporary Canadian literature (qtd. in Rae 260).

Disagreeing with this notion that generic hybridity is somehow brand new to Canadian literature or the exclusive terrain of just one or two select contemporary Canadian writers is Ian Rae, whose new study *From Cohen to Carson* explores the poet's novel in Canada, in particular its propensity for "Blurring the boundary between poetry and prose" (3). Rae's overarching thesis, articulated in the succinct Introduction, is that "a major reason for the abundance of poet-novelists in Canada lies in the reciprocal relation between the contemporary long poem"—of which Canadian writers are a particularly significant exponent—"and [the] novel" (3). *From Cohen to Carson* subjects a number of works by Leonard Cohen, Michael Ondaatje, George Bowering, Daphne Marlatt, and Anne Carson to a close structural and thematic analysis to show that "long poems established the formal precedents for the novels" (6), and that certain of these authors' novels derive from and expand upon "narrative forms that they developed in their [earlier] long poems" (4).

Key to Rae's argument is his tracing of his subject writers' progression from poetry to prose via "serial" (24) forms of writing such as the poem sequence and other "episodic" (24) writing forms. According to Rae, the poet's novel relies for its structure on the author's skilful deployment of serial devices rather than on traditional causal or chronological plot development strategies:

> All of the novelists studied here modify serial strategies to create narratives out of seemingly discrete units. These units...are primarily connected through patterns of iteration (of diction, symbolism, and myth), instead of through causal connections between events in a linear narrative. Since the fragmented storyline presents a challenge to realist demands for a causal plot, these novels rely on intricate framing devices to legitimate their apparent discontinuities. These framing devices privilege themes and patterns in the text, but they also inhibit any singular interpretation of that text. Each act of framing is thus an act of unframing, because the authors reconfigure previous stories and narrative techniques, as well as undermining their own media. I refer to this double movement as "(un)framing".... (25-26)

Rae thus focuses his subsequent chapters on the ways in which his subject authors variously engage in this process of "(un)framing": Cohen (un)frames narrative because he "is drawn to the framed instant as a means of arresting and intensifying chronological time" (41) in *The Favourite Game* (1963) and *Beautiful Losers* (1966); Ondaatje (un)frames the series because he "configures his narratives according to recursive patterns of word and image association" rather than through "the chronological grid of a conventional plot" (91) in works such as *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970); Bowering (un)frames the serial novel (138) because he so deftly deploys this "hybrid form" towards "accommodating the linguistic and formal pyrotechnics of the lyric and the long poem while sustaining the narrative dimension of the novel" (139); Marlatt (un)frames the quest narrative (177) because she "reconsider[s] the function of desire in the quest narrative and structur[es] her narrative around...a serial alternative to...linear prose" (213-14) in works such as *Ana Historic* (1988); Carson (un)frames myth (223) because she "uses shifts in gender and genre to foreground her extensive alterations to the myths that underlie" such works as *Autobiography of Red* (224).

Rae's methodology is eminently straightforward. For the most part, he subjects the oeuvre of each of the writers under discussion to a systematic reading from earlier works to later works to show their gradual shift from poetry to prose via the process of (un)framing he identifies as being at the heart of the Canadian poet's novel. For example, in the chapter on Cohen, after a useful discussion of the influence on Cohen of A.M. Klein, Rae examines Cohen the poet, reading his earliest collections *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1956) and *The Spice-Box of Earth* (1961) as thematically and generically prescient of the later novels *The Favourite Game* and *Beautiful Losers*. In so doing, Rae offers a context for and an elaboration upon Michael Greenstein's argument from *Third Solitudes* (1989) that *The*

Favourite Game can essentially be seen "as a long narrative poem" not only because "its lyrical style is highly poetic" and "it incorporates a number of poems within its text" (62), but also, more importantly, because the themes of the novel—the complex interrelationships between men and women, between the young and the old, between Jew and Gentile, etc.—are reflected and rearticulated in the book's hybrid genre: "Cohen is clearly posing some difficult questions," Rae writes, "about the relation of poetry to the novel, and in particular of synchrony to diachrony" (66). The favourite game that Cohen plays with the reader is to hint only tantalizingly at the (un)resolvability of any of these binary oppositions.

In the final chapter of his study, Rae responds to some of the criticisms of the poet's novel in Canada, in particular to those made by Stephen Henighan in *When Words Deny the World* (2002), which contains particularly virulent denunciations of Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992) and Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* (1996). One of Henighan's main arguments, in a "centrepiece" chapter called "Free Trade Fiction," is that "the fragmented and metaphor-laden forms of *The English Patient* and *Fugitive Pieces* were largely by-products of the economic climate of the 1990s in Canada and the signing of the NAFTA free-trade deal" (263). Rae's counterargument is that fragmentation and abundant use of metaphor in Canadian poets' novels are not characteristics exclusive to the 1990s, but that authors have been experimenting with such devices "since at least the 1950s" (263). Ondaatje, for example, had been experimenting with postmodernist rhetorical devices, Rae asserts (citing Sam Solecki's argument in *Ragas of Longing* [2003]), in such works as *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, *Rat Jelly*, and *Coming Through Slaughter*" (263), all published in the 1970s, long before NAFTA was even a twinkle in Brian Mulroney's eye. Henighan goes on to argue that the unflattering depiction of Americans in *The English Patient* and *Fugitive Pieces* underscores a myopic view among Canadians that "globalization means Americanization" (qtd. in 263). For Henighan, Ondaatje's and Michaels's works "fail to test Canadian values 'against the contours of other cultures'" (264). Rae responds by devoting the bulk of his closing chapter to a persuasive demonstration that both works do indeed possess great cultural and "historical consciousness" (273), and that Henighan's accusation "that poet-novelists fail to engage with [Canadian] society" is masking his "disdain" for bourgeois Canadian values (285). Rae concludes that "lyrical fiction" cannot and should not be judged "according to realist criteria" (293), a trap into which politically motivated criticism such as Henighan's *When Words Deny the World* can so easily fall.

From Cohen to Carson is a very comprehensive and accessible study of the poet's novel in Canada. It is particularly well documented and researched: the scholarly apparatus is eighty-seven pages long, almost a quarter of the book. Rae's organizational principle of devoting one chapter per writer is sensible, and his judicious use of subheadings within each chapter helps to steer readers easily towards sections of the study in which they are most interested. The five chapters on individual authors are usefully bookended with a thorough Introduction, which succinctly defines Rae's terms and contextualizes his argument, and an incisive concluding chapter, which engages intelligently with a number of high-profile criticisms of the Canadian poet's novel. Rae's important new study will be immensely useful to all students and readers of twentieth-century Canadian poetry and prose.

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NATIONAL AL PURDY DAY
APRIL 21, 2009

In recognition of the importance of Al Purdy to Canadian poetry, the iconic symbol of the A-frame to Canadian culture, and in support of the Purdy A-frame Trust, the League of Canadian Poets officially declares APRIL 21, 2009 NATIONAL AL PURDY DAY. We invite all Canadian poets, and lovers of Canadian poetry to host a Purdy Party to raise funds to preserve this important cultural and heritage property.

Al Purdy, the man widely regarded as Canada's first true national poet, died in April, National Poetry Month, in the year 2000. In a way, his death marked the end of a century in which the Canadian cultural identity—under pressure from separatist tensions, two world wars, the rapid development of the mass media and the sensation of being a young nation adrift between older colonial powers and our newer imperialist neighbour—experienced its most profound growing pains. No other poet was as resolute in addressing those pains as Al Purdy. He did so not only by writing about the issues head-on, but also by listening to the people around him, by writing a poetry rooted in the daily life of the people and places of the Canada he knew and loved, from sea to sea to sea. He was writing poems that were relevant to Canadians, and, for over forty years, Canadians listened.

The position of Canadian Parliamentary Poet Laureate was not legislated into existence until 2001, so Purdy never ascended to the office that so many believed he was meant to inhabit. In lieu of any official laurels from Parliament Hill, the League of Canadian Poets created an award to honour Purdy for his exceptional status among Canadian writers, and, just weeks before his death, they invested him with the honorary moniker "The Voice of the Land." It was one of many accolades the poet would receive in his lifetime, and it would be among of the first to follow him, quite literally, to his grave.

The words "The Voice of the Land," along with the insignia of the Order of Ontario and the Order of Canada, are inscribed on Purdy's book-shaped gravestone, marking the place where his ashes are buried in the modest cemetery at the foot of Purdy Lane in Ameliasburg, Ontario near the famous A-frame.

That A-frame house, made out of second-hand lumber and original poetry, became the most famous writer's house in the country. Hundreds of writers and their housemates found their way to Roblin Lake to visit the Purdys and talk about poetry and history while downing beer or wild grape wine. Coleridge and his friends had their lake country, and now the Cana-