

More of **THIS/ TISH/ SHIT**

Frank Davey. *When Tish Happens: The Unlikely Story of 'Canada's Most Influential Literary Magazine'*. Toronto: ECW Press, 2011. 331 pp.

Tish was one of the most important twentieth-century student publications in Canada. Comparable in energy and in its ultimate function as a literary launching pad to other primarily undergraduate ventures such as *The Goblin*, *The McGill-Fortnightly Review*, and *Raven*, *Tish* was unique for its attempted adherence to a specific rather than eclectic aesthetic. The terms of that aesthetic have been meticulously mapped out primarily by the authors associated with magazine themselves, including Fred Wah, George Bowering, Daphne Marlatt (nee Buckle), Roy Miki, Jamie Reid, Warren Tallman, and Frank Davey. Each of these authors (who are not the only authors associated with the first nineteen issues of *Tish*) has commented multiple times, highlighting their sense of the importance of the newsletter. Indeed, the amount of reportage on the first period of *Tish* by outsiders pales in comparison to the amount of attention the principals have devoted to their inaugural literary effort. It was obviously felt to be deeply significant to their emergence as writers.

This personal significance helps to explain the autobiographical framing of Davey's approach to the *Tish* narrative. Davey begins the book with his very first memories in Abbotsford, British Columbia, in 1942 just under two decades before the launch of the magazine, and ends it in 1975 just over two decades after Davey's association with *Tish* came to a close. Readers interested in a more developed consideration of the magazine itself, especially of the nineteen issues that Davey helped to edit, will likely be disappointed. This is a personal narrative, extending from Davey's person to the socio-political and literary worlds surrounding him.

At first it seems as if the invocation of broadly significant cultural events before, during, and after *Tish* will be used to incorporate the magazine's unique agenda into the other cultural narratives that are invoked—such as the wars (the Second World War, Korean, and Vietnam), the rise of post-Depression middle-class culture, and the civil rights movement. Instead, however, their significance is ultimately limited to the private concerns and experiences of the author. The only overarching narrative link explicitly offered across the entire book is that of a life lived. Why otherwise spend so much time detailing cars and their various car parts except that Davey was once interested in such things? In the short clips that combine to create the book, character-development, plot, themes, shifting-points of view, and

style are all handled simply even crudely. Given that the book has chosen the personal and the anecdotal as its primary modes, rather than the analytical or the confessional, these elements of narrative are missed.

The strength of Davey's critical writing has always stemmed from his insistent meta-consciousness and his remarkable ability to recognize the underlying structures that organize or enable an author's or critic's writing. In many instances, Davey has been the first critic to recognize ideological frames at work in a body of literature that, subsequently, entirely altered the way critics have written about those texts. While this book begins with a rather playful, and occasionally funny, historiographic metaconsciousness, that playfulness grows more sombre, almost bitter, in the latter half of the book. Despite his desire to follow Robert Duncan's advice and "move from personal plaint toward attention to the objects and histories one lived among," the book's humour mutates into an ironic tone that on occasion seems overly oriented towards settling old scores. Calling a largely forgotten poet depicted as a rival "the best known loser" for instance is a far cry from Leonard Cohen's empathetic beautiful losers. Dismissing the attention garnered by Margaret Atwood's criticism by attributing it to her being "photogenic" is undignified.

There is a deeper unevenness to the book. Davey's meta-consciousness surfaces most commonly when dismissing awards and prizes others have received. He describes the jurors of various national awards and their social and aesthetic agenda in an effort to discredit their "cheapening" and "homogenizing" effect. This meta-consciousness disappears, however, in his handling of his own poetry prize, his many literary grants, and his academic honours (he does mention Warren Tallman's role in his Governor-General's award nomination). This inconsistency papers over significant questions that Davey's narrative provokes but never addresses. For instance, as he outlines in detail, he applied for and accepted funding from a Canadian military institution in order to operate his magazine *Open Letter*. In order to do so, however, he had to agree to "avoid publishing material which could prove embarrassing to the Crown." When a guest editor violated this rule, Davey notes how the military enforced their content restriction clause on the magazine. In fact, he attributes the multi-year break between the first and second series of the magazine to the policing of this rule. Was accepting money from a military college with content restrictions somehow less of a cheapening and homogenizing compromise than accepting a peer-adjudicated award after a book has been published? Davey does not interrogate the impact of his decision to pursue that funding in a manner remotely comparable to his interrogation of the awards his colleagues received.

Similarly, he smears the exploration of gender and racial identity politics by *Tish* poets as an attempt to “make their careers seem ‘new and improved’” but mentions without seriously interrogating the literary power that his own race and gender afforded him. Furthermore, he never considers how the advantages of his academic sinecure and position in a professional class impact his writing career. While it is hard to expect authors to fairly assess themselves and their cultural-cum-biological advantages, the fact that this kind of self-consciousness has become something of a trademark of Davey’s writing makes its absence in this instance notable.

Despite these imbalances, the book will likely be well received by that generation who came of age in the late 1950s and early 1960s, prior to the full-frontal assault of the 1960s counter-culture. In light of the radical cultural changes that would follow, Davey presents himself as being at a loss to understand the spectacle of the new culture, caught all agog at the “chunks of hash” that began to appear at social events and the free-love sexual games that the next generation explored. Davey’s group preferred sipping homemade sake and indulging in good old-fashioned infidelities, but the differences extend beyond social practices into aesthetics. He admits, for instance, that he neither understood nor had a vocabulary to discuss the new visual, collagist, and multi-consciousness aesthetics taking root in Vancouver at the same time that the *Tish* collective began exploring their older avant-garde. Despite this gap, however, by an intellectual sleight of hand he attempts to claim those same collagist authors as part of a *Tish* generation (including even bpNichol’s Toronto-based *grOnk*, which was about as far aesthetically from Black Mountain as the period would permit). The gambit of turning the *Tish* movement into the catchphrase for a diverse generation beyond the limited community actively involved in the magazine is useful only in as much as it attempts to give a name to the specific influence of Olson, Duncan, Creeley, and Spicer in Canadian letters, whose influence was hardly universal.

The book articulates some of the fault lines that have appeared and disappeared in the mythologized *Tish* group over the years. Davey has been involved in many public controversies and debates over his career with *Tish* and non-*Tish* authors, including famous entanglements with Earle Birney, Raymond Souster, Robin Mathews, and Atwood, many of which are detailed in this book. Given the provocative tone and content of *When Tish Happens*, it is likely that this book will generate controversies of its own or serve to perpetuate those that already exist.

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