

Book Reviews

David Carpenter. *Courting Saskatchewan: A Celebration of Winter Feasts, Summer Loves, and Rising Brookies*. Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1996. Pp. x, 179. \$26.95.

We in Western Canada are fortunate in our current literary essayists. I think particularly of three, Robert Kroetsch, Sharon Butala, and David Carpenter, probably because of the epistemological range they represent. Kroetsch, the postmodernist, cavorts in the unmaking of referentiality and teleology; Butala, the animist-mystic, uncovers issues of spirit in and through the natural world, while Carpenter, at the helm of the good ship middle earth, negotiates nature and society with humour and insight. All three, interestingly, are novelists as well as essayists.

Carpenter's earlier collection, *Writing Home* (1994), touched on a variety of subjects—personal, literary-critical, and regional; the one I am reviewing now, *Courting Saskatchewan*, has obviously been conceived and executed in a more unitary fashion. As the title indicates, all the pieces are concerned with Canada's central prairie province; within Saskatchewan they focus particularly on Carpenter's home city of Saskatoon and environs; further, they are arranged in the sequence of the seasons, from winter to autumn. The seasonal emphasis is consistent with an emphasis on nature still possible in this relatively sparsely-populated province; we attend the mating dance of sharptail grouse; we fish in an isolated Northern lake (and elsewhere: fishing is Carpenter's passion). There is generic as well as organizational unity: in his "Preface," Carpenter defines his essays as "creative documentary," that is, he grounds his material in factual account, but may take unannounced liberties with this in the interest of narrative. The essays are very personal: family members and friends frequently appear in the pages, along with reminiscences, observations, and speculations—and, I should add, recipes. Their occasions are those of everyday experience, but with idiosyncratic twists: the building of an igloo (or, as Carpenter more accurately puts it, a "quinzhee") in a backyard as a way of adapting to January, encounters with garter snakes and circus

rides, or the tremors of first love for Judy Waitress of Lake O'Hara while on a summer job at Château Lake Louise.

I have used inadvertently the word "twists" in the above paragraph. I say "inadvertently" because I realize at this point its aptness as a metaphor for Carpenter's narrative strategy. I am not sure if I am thinking of the meandering of a prairie river, or of the sharper unpredictable movements of a hooked rainbow trout, but let me illustrate from "Fourteen Vignettes and An Ounce of Civet," where the narrator speculates on March (the last month of winter, the month of yearning, the "bummer of a month") and connects it with such apparently incompatible motifs as the Bernardo-Homulka murders, Wanuskewin (the Cree heritage site near Saskatoon), two women visual artists in Saskatoon, the city's annual Sports and Leisure show, George Shearing playing "Mac the Knife," Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and the honking arrival of seventeen Canada geese. This essay perhaps maximizes the twisting and turning, but all use indirections to find their directions out.

It might be too much to say that the essays themselves have a plot independent of the seasonal procession, but certainly in the last season represented, autumn, there is something like an intervention which changes the course of the book. Autumn reintroduces the issues of death and life that were prominent in the book's winter section, but on a much more intimate note. Carpenter personally wrestles the great unmaker, but, with the dedicated assistance of others, overcomes that adversary. Two essays, "Carpe Diems" and "The End of the Hunt," and an epilogue explore that event and its aftermath. I urge readers to discover the riches of this moving finale for themselves.

Carpenter's prose is deceptive in its apparent artlessness: what at first appears as negligently casual is in fact inventive, witty, and precise; an elegant adaptation of Saskatchewanics, the laconic idiom of prairie folk. Sharptail grouse dancing in spring are "Baryshnycocks" (75); an abandoned power plant seems in winter's depth "to be waiting for God's jumper cables" (46); approaching geese manoeuvre in unison "like an airplane coming down to a landing strip in a high wind . . . dipping, tilting, flapping back to the horizontal" (167). As a veteran of prairie winters, I appreciate Carpenter's observation that the blahs lack the rich and sad musical tradition of the blues (the blahs being the fidgety depressive mood widespread in February).

There is in these essays an unerring touch at work which traces the contours of human and non-human life and of Saskatchewan urban and rural; Carpenter draws from this exploration thoughts and commitments of considerable import, including the planetary.

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