tions. Whether it is Diana Brydon discussing four women writers (Aidoo, Brodber, Garner, Rule) to advocate the scope for choosing, and for *constructing* alternative familial relationships, which their works present; or Aritha van Herk wittily suggesting the complicity between postcolonialism and postmodernism, which Australian and Canadian writers exhibit in their varying deconstructions of the notion of "home"; or Craig Tapping dismissing the business of regionalism—margins and centres—and showing Samuel Selvon, Jack Hodgins, and Rodney Hall at work marvelling in ec/centricity; here we have lively points of view and demonstrations of how to move from place to place tactfully and helpfully. Nan Bowman Albinski's piece on indigenous writers of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand is also sensitive. From this section, only Mark Williams's essay on National Epic disappointed me, partly because he offers to bring Rushdie, Hulme, and Harris into conversation with each other, but in fact sidelines Harris, and partly because I see Keri Hulme as *so* different from Salman Rushdie as to render their linkage in an essay like this simply pointless.

Bruce King provides an introductory essay to the collection that is wide-ranging and provocative, with an occasional suggestion of defensiveness. He resists the current process of the post-colonialisation of Commonwealth critique, suggesting to me the sense of threat that some old Commonwealth hands feel in the face of the newly popular field as defined in the United States. But then, I would like to think that the different inflection to these studies that is coming from Canada's "hegemonic" neighbour is providing a healthy challenge. And there is one curious contradiction in King's articulate survey of the current situation. He underscores the degree to which international trends in communication and market forces have changed what we are dealing with in Commonwealth literature; but he also has a "sinking feeling that feminism, multiculturalism, decolonisation and other forms of self-determination have proved good business in providing an improved source of inexpensive skilled workers and in creating new markets" (14), yet does not think that the Commonwealth novel is addressing this contradiction. In fact, this volume suggests that it is doing just that, at least in several of the postmodern fictions discussed.

PATRICK HOLLAND

Frank Davey. *Post-National Arguments: The Politics of the Anglophone-Canadian Novel since 1967*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1993. pp. 277. $45.00; $17.95 pb

If I am reading him right, Frank Davey has declared that "Canada," as an internally conflicted, discrete political entity, is under erasure in recent Canadian fiction. The concept of a "Canada" in which citizens

actively participate in the construction of their nation through argument and difference has become, apparently, so problematic that Canadian writers will not, or cannot, portray it in their fiction.

In *Post-National Arguments: The Politics of the Anglophone-Canadian Novel since 1967*, Davey examines "the signs, discourses, and narrative strategies at work" (7) in 16 different post-centennial Canadian novels, arguing that almost every novel privileges harmony over conflict, unity over difference, and "universal" ideals over national political process. Although these novels may narrate political *events*, Davey looks always to their modes of discourse—narrative structure, imagery, syntax—for evidence of attempts at homogenization and transcendence, which, he argues, serve to erase difference and to move debate beyond the realm of the political.

Few novels in this study (except for Jeannette Armstrong's *Slash* and George Bowering's *Caprice*) escape these charges. Both Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* and Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* evoke images of nature that Davey finds extra-political. Laurence's closing image of the river "appears to enclose the various social conflicts of the novel . . . within some mysterious 'natural' process," thus "rendering [social problems] 'acceptable'" (40). The "organic imagery" (952) of Wiebe's closing passage has "unavoidable resonances of European romantic primitivism and Lawrentian vitalism" (53) and thus "delivers Big Bear into an ideological harmony with white culture"—a "humanistic harmony impossible in the actual social relations of the characters" (54). The "narrative of beauty" with which Michael Ondaatje closes *In the Skin of a Lion* performs an "eliding of meaningful social conflict beneath figures of pattern, beauty, or artistic construction" (156). Images of "social harmony" (107) in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* serve to efface social and racial difference. Kogawa's main character retreats from political action into the "unity of nature" and her desire to "recapture" a "lost family harmony" (109). The "lyrical conclusion" of Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic*, "with its merging of lovers and its return to birth" (206), focusses on the body and thus "locate[s] the power for change outside of language and outside of the social order . . . affirming the transcendent over the political" (256). In *The Tent Peg*, by Aritha van Herk, "[s]ocial conflict . . . vanishes beneath gender generalization" (180) and "national political conflicts . . . fade beneath feminist concerns" (181).

By setting "the political" up against issues of nature, art, the family, the body, and "feminist concerns," Davey appears to ignore the intense politicization of these issues that has taken place since 1967. But for Davey, "the political" has a more specific meaning. It involves "direct social action" (261) and "the processes by which national decisions are made and socially consequential actions undertaken" (253). Given this definition, Davey's argument becomes irresistible, for although all

of these novels depict social conflict, it is clear that few of them promote political dissension as a force for social change.

Davey concludes that Canadians are living in a "post-national" state, in which citizens reject political process and seek refuge in the "universal" ideals of liberal humanism. So, one begins to ask, why is it that these novels, "written for general Canadian audiences" (7), seem to reject the political process? Why do they seek to resolve difference rather than to view it as a necessary means for change? Why do they so often figure power as "distant, alien, international" (79)? One might argue that these novels simply reflect the clichéd "national character" of Canada—passive, polite, self-effacing, and colonial in its belief that power, like all truly great events, happens elsewhere. But the answer is undoubtedly more complicated and more sinister than that.

Perhaps Davey's most significant point is that

> [E]very one of the sixteen novels communicates mistrust, usually profound mistrust, of social and political process, and often a narrow focus on a particular constituency. Their repeated portrayals of individuals left to their own resources . . . appear to reflect not so much a preference for individualism as *a despair about polity.* (265; emphasis added)

Davey does not examine the possible causes of this despair, but surely they are numerous and alarming. To name a few, citizens are alienated from national decision-making by their perception that the political process is irreparably corrupt, by their lack of information about the issues involved, by political campaigns that obscure those issues, and by exploitative labour practices and widespread poverty that leave many Canadians too busy, too tired, and too worried about personal issues to participate in national ones. It is no wonder that we are living in "a state invisible to its own citizens" (266), for these citizens perceive those "processes by which national decisions are made" (253) as taking place in an élite realm from which they have been forcibly excluded.

According to Davey, "the only means [Canadians] have of defending themselves against multinational capitalism" is their participation "in the arguments of a nation that is being continuously discursively produced and reproduced from political contestation" (24). Change can occur only through "continued debate and irresolution" (8). Therefore, Davey is suspicious of harmonizing ideals that appear to close debate and resolve conflict. An optimistic reading of this study might construct it as an inspiring call to cast off our dreams of harmony and to engage actively in political dissension. But a grimmer picture emerges. What Davey's study seems to prove is that the battle for power is already over. The disenfranchised citizens of Canada do indeed feel a deep "despair about polity," and the ideals valorized in these novels—nature, beauty, sexuality, and art—constitute their consolation prize.

CATHERINE HUNTER