Non-Fiction

Denise Roig, *Butter Cream: A Year in a Montreal Pastry School*, Signature Editions, 2008

Aislinn Hunter, *A Peepshow with Views of the Interior: Paratexts*, Palimpsest Press, 2009

Jim Oaten, *Accelerated Paces: Travels Across Borders and Other Imaginary Boundaries*, Anvil Press, 2008

Denise Roig's *Butter Cream* proved to be a very pleasant (dare I say 'tasty') surprise. When it first rose out of the package, I had my doubts, saying to myself, 'I hate butter and I'm not all that crazy about cream, so this book starts off with two strikes against it.' But this is a case of literally not judging a book by its cover. Or perhaps a case of making sure to read the fine print in the subtitle: 'A Year in a Montreal Pastry School.' In fact, by the time I got to '*fin*' 250 pages later, I realized I had undergone a thoroughly enjoyable (and educational) experience, not to mention a much greater appreciation of all those pastry-chefs-in-waiting who aspire to creating the *crème caramel sans parallèle*.

Roig manages to combine the light and light-hearted in the world of intense pastry schooling (and the fine art of baking) with a real grasp of the various human interactions involved in such an endeavour. These interactions reflect both those between teachers and students and among the students themselves. Roig's strengths lie in her ability to reveal human interaction in circumstances both rewarding and nerve-wracking. Not that this should come as a surprise: Roig is an established, veteran writer of both non-fiction and fiction, with several collections of short stories (*A Quiet Night and a Perfect End* and *Any Day Now*), and an experienced freelancer with more than 30 years in the field.

Through the teacher-student connection, we witness the intensity of the actual learning program: how one goes about creating the various basic ingredients that go into the classic pastries and desserts. Through the connection we also get the intensity of the interpersonal clashes and bonds that the students have to sort out for themselves. The following excerpt from the chapter entitled 'Butter Cream 101' encapsulates Roig's approach:

> It's the start of Module Nine, Whipped Rising Batters: choux pastry (the light and fluffy stuff of which éclairs are made), sponge cakes and meringues. I've got a killer cold, as do Michèle, Rena and Trina. Everyone's hacking. Baking fatigue has set in. But Claudette is jolly this morning: 'In this trade you have to be enthusiastic even at one in the morning!'

> she says, and proceeds to teach us the most basic cake on the planet: *le génoise*. Sponge cake, my mother would call it. Génoise looks, even tastes, simple. After all, it's only made with eggs, sugar and flour. But this is French pastry, so it isn't. Génoise is a fragile little thing.

A sense of fragility and the overcoming of deficits, both personal and social, threads its way through the book. So does the idea of growing, of fulfilling certain dreams, of being able to look in the mirror while congratulating oneself. Roig has the ability to pass these feelings on to the reader and to make all of us appreciate what goes into achievement, what it means to accomplish something, and the sacrifices that need to be made in order to do so.

If there is one book I would recommend as a working and accessible example of the 'postmodern' in literature, it would be Aislinn Hunter's *A Peepshow with Views of the Interior: Paratexts*. It is incredibly insightful in discussing subjects ranging from modern Irish poetry to the history of natural museums in Great Britain, from Wordsworth's treatment of hero worshippers to the Brontë family's almost addictive relationship with books. More importantly, it creates a new language with which to examine our ambiguous connections to the external world, specifically to the objects of that world. And this is a language that combines creativity, literary criticism, philosophy, sociology and metalinguistics. It is a book where content and form come together, where the separations between 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' are erased, and where the author is not afraid to go from the intensely personal to the mathematically objective.

The book is broken down into sections that, at first, seem like your typical manuscript divisions—Foreword, Contents, Acknowledgements, Prologue, Introduction, Preface and so on—until you realize you've come to the end (Notes and Colophon) without having worked through the actual body of the book. I was struck by the simplicity of this approach and by the way it fit into what Hunter was trying to transmit to the reader, namely how we connect (and yet never really connect) in so many myriad and changing ways with the objects that 'form' the world around us:

> Paratexts are the edges of the road rutted from summer rain. They are the small stone cairns incised with numbers that sit between villages. They tell travelers how far they've come, how far they might be going. They are the letter of introduction in the woman's reticule, the thick black ink on the outside of the envelope. The paratext is what sits outside (para-) the thing we are trying to say.

In many ways, this is a book about attempts at a special type of

communication, the various ways in which words try to capture the objects of the external world, and how these attempts will always be in some way or other on the outside, never getting to the actual 'body,' the object-as-it-is. That is, the centre is missing, as paralleled in the structure of this book. It is in some ways a trick that is constantly changing and trying to keep people from realizing that it is a trick. In describing 'Peepshow with Views of the Interior of a Dutch House,' the famous 17th-century perspective box painting by Samuel van Hoogstraten from which the book takes its title, Hunter states:

> Place your eye against the peephole and the flat expanse of the interior suddenly folds out as if a world filled with actual furnishings and paintings; a place some lilliputian version of your self could walk through. This is a tricky math: the illusion of three dimensions on a two-dimensional plane.

Hunter also collects in the fold such heavyweights as Susan Sontag, Heidegger and Sartre, while managing to make them accessible and explaining what they were trying to say through a unique and oblique angle. At times, the book is dense and intense, at others, clever and filled with indulgent puns. It provides insights that many of us would do well to examine again rather than simply accepting them as the interpretation of someone else's impossible search for meaning. In trying to answer Heidegger's question of what is a 'thing' and a 'thing-in-itself,' Hunter says:

> It is to say Thou. To allow for ambiguity. To suggest that things might be read *in and of themselves*. It is saying that we cannot know everything; that we can never get to the thingness of things even if we break them down to powder in our hands.

Just about every page of this book provides a new insight into the world of language, imagination, the I and the other. At the same time, Hunter manages to avoid preaching, or philosophizing for the mere sake of it. I would recommend *Peepshow* for anyone who has ever thought about these intractable questions and who would like to descend further into the beautiful mystery that is consciousness.

Alternately, at a quick glance a reader might have the tendency to mark Jim Oaten's *Accelerated Paces* as yet one more example of the crossover patterns between fiction and non-fiction that are becoming more and more common these days. And the subtitle ('Travels Across Borders and Other Imaginary Boundaries') tends to reinforce that tendency. As the back flap proclaims:

> Whether peeking out from the back seat of Mom and Dad's car or surveying the grimy wings of mental wards, *Accelerated Paces* hurdles that uneasy terrain between creative fact and honest fiction. These short stories and pieces ignore borders as they jaunt through external trips and internal voyages.

That statement is both true and not true. In fact, the stories do not really ignore borders: they simply play on either side of any drawn boundary. Thus, there are stories that come across as straightforward confessional fiction ('Stardust,' 'Penumbra,' 'Forty-Foot Love') and others as a combination of creative non-fiction, speculative philosophy and travelogue ('Neither Here nor There,' 'We Will Be Landing' and the title piece).

At his best, Oaten plays with perspective, zooming in and out of multiple points-of-view. He offers direct statements, describes events and incidents, and then leaves it up to the reader to make the connections between them. For instance, in the opening story, 'Stardust,' we are presented with a scenario where a small boy (the narrator) and his even younger brother are in the back seat of a car when the younger brother chokes on a toy belonging to the narrator. After the father manages to dislodge the toy, Oaten goes on to make what would seem an end-of-story statement:

> And I knew—as my brother sputtered and wept, and my mother soothed and caressed, and my father massaged his hand and fumbled for cigarettes, as trucks pulled past and the stars brightened on those endless fields and I recovered my car and clutched it to my chest—that nothing would ever change and we would all be together forever.

But it isn't a story-ending passage. We suddenly cut away to the narrator in later years, himself a father, someone who is about to alter the 'foreverness' of a relationship:

> When I told my four-year-old son I was leaving, that I was moving out of our house, and that I wouldn't always be there all the time any more, I cupped his face to comfort him.
>
> It was like laying my hands on heaven just so I could scratch out the stars.

This is powerful writing with a deep emotional imprint. On the other side of the ledger are what come across as fairly common and obvious complaints about travel, for instance—as if coming from the mouth of an irritated tourist:

> There comes a point in just about every journey where nothing really matters. After all the nail-biting prep, the nervous nitpicking, list-check-

ing, reserving, and packing, after the meat-packing-plant processing of security checks finally complete their small humiliations, your shoulders slowly unfurl from all the pent-up stress and you realize that for two days, for two weeks, a month, or maybe more, everything you know is thousands of miles away, and none of it can touch you.

On occasion, Oaten is able to combine the two—such as at the end of 'Allahua Akbar, Do You Read?' For the most part, this piece comes across as a travelogue of a trip to Mombassa, Kenya, and the perils of public transport (a familiar subject when it comes to large African cities), but, in describing the reverberating sound of the calls to prayer, he writes:

> And then another, and another as the call is caught in one throat, held, shaped and strengthened, then passed to the next, and the next, and the next, until the whole island echoes with Allah and the stars fill your eyes and you float through the sky with the sound of God inside.

It is unfortunate that we don't see more of these passages, the ones where travel and insight meet and meld to offer a satisfying glimpse into Oaten's perspective of the world; more of this and less standard travelogue would have made for a stronger collection.

—Michael Mirolla