

## Fiction

**David Derry**, *Sentimental Exorcisms*, Coach House Books, 2009

**Anik See**, *postcard and other stories*, Freehand Books, 2009

**Paul Headrick**, *The Doctrine of Affections*, Freehand Books, 2010

There is something quite Victorian quaint and at the same time post-Freudian quirky in David Derry's *Sentimental Exorcisms* collection. Perhaps it's the denseness and meticulousness of the characters combined with their just-on-the-edge neurotic behaviour. Or it might be the combination of an underlying-but-undefined justice and a never-can-tell randomness that somehow manages to punish these characters not for doing the wrong thing but for daring to open themselves up, for daring to take chances based on those quasi-neuroses.

What we get are characters that are, in most ways, leading what would be seen as 'normal' lives, yet they get broken down thanks to the small portion of themselves falling just outside the usual definitions of normalcy. As well, the characters themselves can find nothing wrong in what they do, in the little psychic tics that all too rapidly grow from single-cell irritants to explosive public scandals. In the opening story (which sets the stage both thematically and structurally for the six comprising the collection), the first-person narrator convinces himself that it's okay to peek into the sex lives of others. During his rationalizing internal monologue, he decides what kind of ladder would best suit his intentions. He gives himself permission to do so by stating,

You must understand there are few more upstanding than me. It's my conviction that both rapists and wife beaters should be castrated as a matter of course. For I believe in the larger good, the big picture.... By proceeding, I'd clearly be committing deliberate—if hands-off—inursions into people's sacred privacy. But if they didn't realize, was harm done?

Similarly, in 'Distance,' respectable, conservative and somewhat-happily married financial market 'chartist' Trevor Spates finds himself in horrible trouble after impulsively entering a strip club. Visits to the club coincide with renewed sexual enthusiasm in satisfying his wife, but it all goes terribly wrong when he steps up to defend 'the honour' of one of the strippers, the one who reminds him of his wife. Flinging an empty beer tumbler at the assailant, Trevor hits the stripper instead. Criminal charges, visits to a psychiatrist, and job loss follow. The story ends with Trevor about to take an experimental 'happiness' pill provided by his brother-in-law. This brother-in-law confesses to having been a serial rapist and uses the pill to keep down his aggres-



sions, which he claims modern males aren't allowed to explore to the extent needed by their genetic makeup.

Derry delights in taking a foible, a normally harmless behaviour, and turning it into angst of the most painful kind. At the same time, because he does this without malice toward his maladroit characters, the laughter the situations unleash is not sadistic or spiny. For instance, in 'The Eventual Eponymization of Tim Pine,' the title character—a gentle Polish-Canadian insurance firm accountant and specialized stamp collector—lands in a literal 'shitter'-load of trouble and becomes the laughing stock of his co-workers, all because it's his own home toilet or bust: he must 'avoid the revolting ceremony of a gluteus maximal christening at the waters of a stranger's bowl.' One feels for poor old Tim: first, he has to manoeuvre through the pitfalls and traps involved in mastering the English language, and then he has to cope with the unsanitary conditions he finds in the firm's communal bathrooms. In the end, his own meticulousness undoes him, as it undoes each of the lead characters in Derry's subtly subversive collection.

If Derry attempts to negotiate the neuroses of male characters blithely unaware of the dangers awaiting them in stories structured to keep the reader at a distance, Anik See in *postcard and other stories* reverses the emotional polarity. We find ourselves deep inside the hearts and heads of the six lead characters here presented, leaving us with little room to breathe, let alone make 'objective' determinations or judgments. At the same time, the characters invite such judgment, given as they are to analyzing their situations while in the midst of living them. The lead character in the first story 'binary,' for example, is a high-school maths teacher, someone who actually tries to set up equations for human relationships.

In See's stories, it's all about the middle. There are hardly any beginnings and definitely no endings. Of course, 'closure' is a dirty word when it comes to short stories these days, but See takes it to another level, almost as if this open-endedness too arises from a formulation in second-order logic, the logic of relationships. After a tempestuous series of connections between the first-person narrator and a lover who comes out to her ice-bound cabin, 'Ice Out,' the second story, ends thus:

I want to tell him that I heard the first summer loon call today, that one, you know, the long *whoooooo-eeeeeee-oooo* that sends shivers down every Canadian's spine. I want to tell him that ice out is almost over, that I can get from the cabin to the lodge with the canoe now, but he hangs up before I say anything.

These are stories about dreams as seen from afar, lines on the horizon that never appear any closer no matter how much distance you eat up between them and you. This is especially true of a story like 'Kingwell,' in which we get a blending of fact and fiction. The narrator in the story talks about the dreams she is having that feature Toronto social commentator/pop philosopher Mark Kingwell. The inability to make contact is doubled here. Or perhaps what the writer is trying to say is that the only place one can make such true contact is in a dream: 'And I look at him and he stops talking mid-sentence and he looks back at me with those steely grey-blue eyes of his and he leans down and kisses me. On the lips.'

But even in a dream, it doesn't end with the happily-ever-after kiss. After kissing her and after she kisses him back, the Mark Kingwell in the dream asks, 'What now, huh?' and then walks away, leaving her in the underground parking lot: 'I'm alone. I'm alone at quarter-to-six in the morning on the longest day of the year, the sky crisp and blue and the air cool and clean, like Alberta air. *What now?* not even having occurred to me.'

The feeling of disjointedness, inexplicable loss, the inability to reach out and grasp what one wants and the constant, if useless, effort to continue to do so comes together most forcibly in 'postcard.' The title story consists of a series of blurbs, often almost entirely blank pages with a bit of commentary on the edges, bland marketplace descriptions and veiled indications of rumblings and not-quite-rightness beneath the picture-postcard surface. In the end, the story fails to come together in a way that one would like a short story to cohere, fails to become greater than the sum of its parts. But then again that seems to be the point of the exercise.

All too often, short story collections that focus on one theme come across as little more than practice lessons handed out by creative-writing teachers: 'Go home, now, and write 500 words on sunshine. Or party dresses.' So when I first read the PR material on Paul Headrick's *The Doctrine of Affections*, I prepared myself for the professional equivalent on the subject of music. Luckily, that was not the case. Headrick's thematic compass may have been set on music as the organizing principle, but his stories are really about the gamut of human emotions: from the pride of an impoverished guitarist in 19th-century Paris ('The Studies of Fernando Sor') to the feelings of loneliness and second-class citizenship felt by the son of a locally famous mom and pop singing act ('Shame on the Johnson Boys').

The musical glue that holds the collection together is not used as an excuse to produce facile answers or responses to emotional situations.



Rather, Headrick delves deeply into the way humans come to an understanding (often unconsciously or subconsciously) of these emotional responses—with music of one sort or another as the focal point around which the characters interact. Thus, in one story (“The Franklin Chair”), the lead character struggles to find the correct approach to winning an important Chair in Aretha Franklin Studies, while at the same time trying to make sense of why she is so concerned with a student in her class who is all over the map in his relationship with an absent girlfriend. In “The Youngest Gods,” Wagner enthusiasts Felicia and Warren are caught out after a power failure abruptly puts an end to the *Das Rheingold* performance they’ve so looked forward to attending. Using the play of light and shadow in this non-electrified world, Headrick conveys effectively the malaise that seems to have seized their souls, providing at the same time a postmodern version of the dying of the gods:

It was not late, but it was cold. They placed candles around the bed, and the shifting light made them seem to rise and fall, a raft on an easy sea. They began to make love and then stopped, lay beside each other without touching, sensed the chill and the empty darkness outside the circle of candles.

In the quirkiest story of all (“Imagine Me and You, I Do”), Headrick brings together nostalgia for 1960s bubblegum pop, the osmotic borders between fiction and factual reporting, identity crises, multiple storytelling approaches, the value and/or danger of representing a recognizable person within a fictional context, and the effort needed to keep a relationship going. It’s a juggling act that Headrick manages to pull together in a natural and seemingly effortless way, without the necessity of shouting it out. The story ends in a typically low-key manner, with the main character/author folding laundry:

I looked up at the laundry room windows, but they’re small, high up, and they look out directly on the adjacent building, so it’s very difficult to tell what the weather is when you’re down in the laundry room. I wondered about the weather. I decided to ask Heather if she would like to go for a walk. I started to hum a song.

It’s the kind of writing that relies very much on subtlety, nuance, tiny juxtapositions, echoes and glimpses into the human emotional furnace. In the wrong hands, it could easily turn drab and uninteresting. Headrick never allows that to happen.

—Michael Mirolla

