

Margaret Sweatman, *The Players*, Goose Lane Editions, 2009
Rhea Tregebov, *The Knife Sharpener's Bell*, Coteau Books, 2009

In *The Players* and *The Knife Sharpener's Bell*, readers are transported to other places and times—17th-century England, in the case of Sweatman's novel, and Depression-era Winnipeg, in Tregebov's. These settings, however, are only starting points for narratives as geographically wide-ranging as they are thematically broad in scope. And while *The Players* is arguably more challenging—in some ways less accessible than *The Knife Sharpener's Bell*—readers will glean from both novels the kind of fraught satisfaction that defines memorably fine fiction.

Focused on Lilly Cole, whose story begins as she is launched into her 'real life' by the untimely death of her mother, *The Players* is divided into two parts. The first part, set in plague-ridden London, introduces us to the innocent 16-year-old orphan as she is drawn into prostitution by her Aunt Meg. No less swift is the development of Lilly's relationship with Bartholomew, poet and playwright; 'Bart' effects her meeting and subsequent sexual involvement with the King of England himself, Charles II. As the narrative unfolds, Lilly moves from prostitute to actress to murderess. Indeed, in the second part of the novel, Lilly finds herself bound for what we now know as James Bay; she is figurative 'baggage' on a mission of exploration headed by two Frenchmen supported by the court. Her departure from England is a direct result of a dramatic dose of 'reality' into Lilly's tenuous world of scripted drama and courtly romance. When one of Bart's friends rapes her in an alley, her response is to grab a fortuitously available piece of broken glass and drive it 'into the pocket of flesh' under his arm, then striking 'once more, at the A of the ribs.' Her only chance to escape her own hanging is to become a member of the expedition, albeit an unwanted one. Finding herself with child (King Charles's) *en route*, Lilly resolves to endure the abundant misogyny and threatening behaviour of the sailors with whom she travels, not to mention the extreme physical hardships of a cross-Atlantic voyage to an unforgiving new land.

As its title suggests, *The Players* thematizes performance—via Lilly, most obviously, but also via other characters who, unbeknownst to them, take on roles in a 'drama' that will alter the course of history. Crucial to the drama are the power dynamics embedded in the relationships between 'players' (including, necessarily, the dynamics between the Cree and the English/French explorers). Lilly may be empowered by her talents for performing on stage and for playing

the part of the King's mistress, but she's also decidedly empowered when she exacts revenge on her rapist. However, she is powerless to fight the consequences of her actions and, after bearing a child in the northern wilds, she finds herself taking on the most challenging—the most frighteningly unscripted—role of all.

The Players is by no means an easy read, and my sense is that readers who are familiar with the nuances of Restoration England will fare better in the navigation of this novel, not least of all because the sociopolitical backdrop of the narrative is key to understanding the actions and attitudes of its characters. That said, the second half of the novel is—arguably for any reader, regardless of background—more engaging than the first, in large part because it is only here that we begin to approach a full understanding of who and what Lilly is. Sweatman is known for three previous novels (*Fox*, 1991; *Sam & Angie*, 1996; *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, 2001) and also known, perhaps more relevantly here, as a lyricist. She provides many moments of poetically rendered insights in the novel. Yet amid the entrances and exits of a large cast of characters, the development of individual characters is compromised. Bart and Lilly are most complexly portrayed, and the relationship between Lilly and her patriarchal shipmate Jack Sparrow is most sensitively developed. But Lilly's fate at the close of the novel, while deliberate, is as ambiguous as the significance of a great many characters in the story. In a telling commentary on the novel as a whole, Charles suggests in one of the narrative's final scenes that Lilly, 'a fine actress,' should not be 'hidden in obscurity.' The reply, that 'There are many marvellous ways to be obscure,' might well be speaking of the narrative itself.

The Knife Sharpener's Bell, by contrast, provides more complexly rendered characters in a finely wrought and heartbreaking exploration of one family's negotiation of the dominant ideological forces of their time. The novel's central character, Annette Gershon, weaves together two narrative strands: In the first, she is an old woman living in Toronto, looking back on her life; in the second, she is a girl living in Winnipeg with her Jewish-Russian parents. Closer in childhood to her father than to her mother, but deeply influenced by both parents' worries during the Great Depression, Annette finds herself travelling with them back to Odessa, the city from which they emigrated. Her parents' staunch, and apparently naïve, belief in communism serves as the impetus for their repatriation. While Annette's half-brother Ben stays in Canada, she is returned to a 'family'—comprised of both blood relations and close friends—who try to help her adjust to life in the USSR.



Annette's coming-of-age is marked by loss—from the suicide of a gentle neighbour in Winnipeg, to the death of her parents as victims in a massacre of Jews in Odessa, to the execution of her daughter's father in one of Stalin's post-war show trials. At the same time, however, Annette is shown tremendous, enduring love throughout her life. Belonging, for her, is a recurring question: 'Why did Poppa bring me here,' she wonders, not long after arriving in Odessa. 'Why do I have to learn everything new? I want to be my old self, the one I knew, the one that never changed.' When the safety of the family in Odessa is threatened by German occupation, Annette is sent to Moscow, taken in by her parents' friends, Raisa and Pavel. And she remains in Moscow after learning of her parents' deaths in a massacre of Jews, while Ben, her older half-brother, never gives up hope of bringing her back to Canada. Annette's decision to remain in the Soviet Union for many years becomes a testament less to her own political beliefs or sense of home than to her loyalty to her parents:

I told myself I wouldn't betray my parents' decision to believe in the workers' paradise. I couldn't bring myself to give up on their version of goodness, the golden promise at the core of their lives—despite the many things about Comrade Stalin's country that I already knew.

The Knife Sharpener's Bell may be more emotionally powerful than *The Players* because Tregebov has, in part, written from life. Her maternal grandfather tried unsuccessfully to take his family back to Russia in 1935, and one of Tregebov's distant cousins was involved in Stalin's 'show trials' following the Second World War. Additionally, Tregebov is a poet (she is the author of six poetry collections, including *Remembering History*, 1982; *Mapping the Chaos*, 1995; and *The Strength of Materials*, 2001) and her lyricism is present in every sentence of this novel, shaping words in potently evocative ways. Yet it remains obvious through this rich narrative that Tregebov is also an accomplished novelist. The motif of the knife sharpener's bell, for instance, is deftly woven into the narrative, with the sound of the bell foreshadowing doom: 'It's there, over and over again, swaying in my head.... No way out.... It comes up, into my throat.' Meanwhile, Annette's recurring memory of peeling an orange given to her by her father acts as another motif: 'I put my small thumb in where Poppa's big thumb made a beginning, work the thick peel loose until it's all gone.' Such finely wrought imagery deftly illuminates fear and comfort, threat and safety, all of which define Annette's existence.

As one who seems consistently powerless to resist forces beyond her, whether familial or ideological, Annette bears some resemblance to Lilly in *The Players*. Readers of Tregebov's novel will wonder, as



Annette wonders herself, if she should have chosen better, if she should have returned to Canada earlier, and if her parents should have chosen differently. By no means unremittingly bleak (as in *The Players*, the birth of a child becomes a symbol of hope), *The Knife Sharpener's Bell* is nonetheless a tragic novel, one that raises questions about home, diasporic identity, and the nature of belonging; it is about beliefs and their unfortunate consequences, choices and their devastating aftermath.

—Lisa Grekul

