

FICTION

Harry Karlinsky, *The Evolution of Inanimate Objects*, Insomniac Press, 2010

A.J. Somerset, *Combat Camera*, Biblioasis, 2010

Much has been made these past few years of the presence of Canada's small presses on national and international awards lists. For example, out of the five titles short-listed for the 2010 Giller Prize two hailed from small presses, including the eventual winner—Johanna Skibsrud's *The Sentimentalists*, published by the small but mighty Gaspereau Press. Meanwhile, three of the five books short-listed for the Commonwealth First Book Award, Canada and Caribbean Region, are also from smaller, independent presses. Two debut novels, Harry Karlinsky's *The Evolution of Inanimate Objects* and A.J. Somerset's *Combat Camera*, prove once again that some of our most daring fiction comes from Canada's independent literary scene.

First-time novelist Harry Karlinsky, a neuroscientist who teaches in the University of British Columbia's psychiatric department, has made a career of understanding the brain, an expertise put to good use in *The Evolution of Inanimate Objects*. Deliciously experimental, the novel recounts the life of Thomas Darwin, Charles Darwin's 11th son. For those keeping score, Darwin Sr. had 10 children, not 11, which ostensibly makes Karlinsky's debut a work of fiction, a label troubled by the copious footnotes, appendixes, and the substantial secondary source material that may or may not be real. Karlinsky divides his novel into four parts. The first four chapters provide an overview of Thomas's life; his 'surviving' scholarly work makes up Chapters 5 to 8; 'original' source material related to his illness and incarceration constitute Chapters 9 and 10; finally, an epilogue assessing Thomas's place in Darwinian scholarship rounds out the novel.

Thomas's magnum opus, as it were, is a brief essay titled 'Hybrid Artefacts and Their Role in Our Understanding of the Evolution of Inanimate Objects.' The paper's thesis, at once brilliant and insane, suggests that everyday objects can, like their sentient counterparts, evolve of their own volition. In a memorable presentation to the Plinian Society, an undergraduate natural sciences salon at Cambridge, Thomas presents what he considers empirical evidence of dessert forks gradually evolving. He argues, 'Due to the agency of increased use, the lowest tine expanded significantly and the pastry fork—a new and distinctive variety of the dessert fork—has evolved into being.' There's something whimsical, almost regressively infantile, about the

way Thomas views the world. In his eyes, the everyday's most banal objects possess the spark of life. Forks are capable of mechanically fusing to one another to facilitate efficient use (the shape of an Oyster-Fork-Spoon, for example, owes its structure to the mating of the Olive Spoon with the Ramekin Fork).

How to account for Thomas's bizarre theories, his nervous breakdown on a train bound for Quebec, his subsequent detainment in a London, Ontario, asylum? Thomas's condition is less a spiral than a process of accretion, and the armchair psychoanalyst will find the first four chapters fertile ground for speculation. Here Karlinsky invents a plausibly nuanced childhood, one in which Thomas himself becomes an object of his father's study. Charles habitually likens his son to various species of plant life and, in one memorable passage, to a pigeon:

The far more interesting correlations were Charles Darwin's whimsical comparisons of Thomas's development to a diverse range of plants and animals. Insectivorous plants were more excitable, iguanas more agile, and rhododendron seeds much hardier. The most unusual inference was when Thomas's melodious intonation of 'Oh, Oh!' was deemed analogous to the musical utterances of the short-beaked tumbler pigeon.

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In the face of such unflattering correlatives, is it any wonder that Thomas might have grown up a bit off-kilter?

Overseeing Thomas's internment is one Dr. Richard Bucke, the London Asylum's true-to-life medical superintendent (and friend to Walt Whitman). Some of the novel's best writing can be found in Bucke's letters to Darwin Sr., where affect overcomes science and a father's grief comes to the fore. On the subject of Charles Darwin, Karlinsky encourages us to examine Thomas contextually, as the son of a prominent thinker whose own contentious theories about evolution faced severe criticism (not to mention accusations of madness) from contemporaries. Tellingly, the novel ends with Karlinsky-as-narrator suggesting how Thomas's work might be read alongside his father's. Is Thomas simply Charles evolved, the Oyster-Spoon to his father's Ramekin Fork? To his credit, though, Karlinsky offers no clear answers. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, and sometimes the sons of geniuses go bonkers just because.

Karlinsky's chosen form—the mock academic study cum biography cum novel—is a brilliant generic mash-up that blurs the line between fact and fiction with addictive panache. Among the novel's many delights are the rich ephemera and (fictional) source material Karlinsky provides. Particularly enthralling are Thomas's sketches of hybrid utensils, astute ethnographical comparisons between forks

that show definite evidence of evolution. Moreover, letters between characters offer rare insight into interpersonal conflicts and soften the novel's academically rigorous edge. In terms of style and structure, the novel's boon is simultaneously its bane. Like any number of scholars, Karlinsky occasionally gives in to exposition, dwelling on the tediously factitious at the expense of real emotional connection. One wishes that he might have had a little more fun with the Darwins, either by doctoring the material at hand to carve a more definite narrative arc, or by using the more rigorously academic study of Thomas Darwin's life as a springboard—à la Timothy Findley's *Pilgrim*—to something more dramatic and emotive.

Of course, doing so would risk undermining the elements that make Karlinsky's debut such an appealing, and undeniably welcome, piece of fiction. *The Evolution of Inanimate Objects* is many things: a family drama, an experiment in mockumentary fiction, an appraisal of mental health in the 19th century, and an imaginative play on Darwinian Theory. It's also a noteworthy offering from a first-time novelist whose evolution as a storyteller should, like the tines on Thomas Darwin's dessert fork, continue to grow.

Though grittier than Karlinsky's debut, A.J. Somerset's novel *Combat Camera* treads similar psychic terrain. Winner of the annual Metcalf-Rooke Award, Somerset follows in the footsteps of past winners Kathleen Winter (author of *Annabel*, a novel short-listed for Can Lit's triple crown of literary awards) and Rebecca Rosenblum (whose first collection earned her a nod as *Maclean's* Can Lit rookie of the year).

Somerset's lead is Frank Zane, a photojournalist turned pornographer traumatized by extended stays in the world's most brutal war zones. For Zane, the scars of the past run deep. The lingering physiological damage of a bullet wound to the gut makes a fresh hell of eating and defecating, and occasional visits from Christine, a spectre from his days documenting wartime carnage, blur the line between reality and fantasy. Sleazy porn shoots and lonesome drinking fill Zane's waking hours.

The novel's narrative picks up when Zane witnesses, for the umpteenth time, one of the male leads abusing a castmate. Only this time the victim is Melissa, a teenage porn starlet with whom Zane has forged a precarious, almost paternal relationship. In coming to her rescue, Zane takes what becomes his first step toward psychological rehabilitation. In many ways, Melissa is the past reincarnated, an ostensible means by which Zane can overcome wartime trauma. Indeed, over the course of their escape to Vancouver, both make the kind of requisite discoveries you would expect from a road narrative:

Melissa begins mapping out a future free of sexual exploitation, while Zane attempts to reclaim his life and career by documenting a porn star's day-to-day life.

With the exception of a few sections in the first person, *Combat Camera* inches forward in an eerie, almost sleepy third-person narrative that highlights Somerset's ability to marry style and substance. Meanwhile, clear mastery of the photographer's lingo shows a real love for the trade and convinces us that we're in the hands of a professional. Some of the novel's best writing comes when Somerset waxes poetic on the photographer's trade: 'The picture is just a circus trick that lets you work with the impossible light,' we're told, and when shooting in darkness, 'you do what you can and alchemy takes care of the rest, silver halides and dye couplers distilling life and motion into a silent dream....' From such passages we gleam heady lessons that transcend the camera lens and relate to life's darker underbelly.

If *Combat Camera* suffers from a central flaw, it's Somerset's regrettable pandering to tropes well below his imagination. While the war-photographer angle is nifty, the story isn't entirely unfamiliar: stoic, substance-abusing male in disrepair meets trampy young girl searching for a father figure. Toss in an unsavory profession, the wittiest in-car banter on this side of the trailer park, and just enough sexual tension to keep things interesting, and presto: a not-so-subtle take on the gritty road-trip romance. As well, the novel might have picked up on some loose threads and tied them together. Zane and Melissa's odd employer and his crafty wife, for example, ostensibly pursue them, to little narrative end.

Still, more interesting than the plot are Somerset's observations about violence, trauma and the human condition. Zane's day job is a perverse reiteration of his days as a photojournalist operating in war-torn countries. In both cases, he documents violence enacted upon bodies in extremis. Somerset's crafty cuts from the present (Zane photographing a young starlet's tears on her first shoot) to the past (Zane coming across slain children in El Salvador) are subtle reminders of our capacity for violence, as well as the voyeuristic pleasure we take from observing the suffering of others. How different is the camera from the rifle, we wonder? Or the scope from the lens?

The novel ends as it should: not easily, but with a modicum of satisfaction. While Zane isn't fixed, he might just be on his way to mending his wounds and re-entering civilized life. That we care about him and Melissa, in the end, brings into clear focus Somerset's artistic potential.

—Andrew MacDonald