

Reviews

Non-Fiction

Don Gayton, *Man Facing West*, Thistle-down Press, 2010

Anne Sorbie, *Memoir of a Good Death: A Novel*, Thistle-down Press, 2010

Both Don Gayton and Anne Sorbie love the landscape of Western Canada, both show characters intensely engaged in those landscapes, and both provide an unexpected angle on their otherwise very different fictional worlds, trying to present a multi-layered reality.

Reading Don Gayton's 'Prologue,' I briefly feared meeting yet another elderly grump at pains to show why *his* life and politics have been exemplary, but then he made me laugh by describing his largely autobiographical stories, a crafty blend of fiction and non-fiction, as 'literary catch and release, for which you do not need a license.' Amused and curious, I stepped into the country of *Man Facing West*.

About two-thirds of Gayton's stories are chronological and memoir-ish. Varying greatly in length, they focus on high (or low) points in his journey from a loving Republican family to solo student, Peace Corps member, Vietnam war resister, and then to marriage and another loving family on the Canadian prairies first and eventually in British Columbia, with ecology and land preservation at the centre of his life. Smitten, I'm now eager to read more of Gayton's work, such as *Wheatgrass Mechanism: Science and Imagination in the Western Canadian Landscape* (1990) and *Interwoven Wild: An Ecologist Loose in the Garden* (2007).

Gayton's writing is admirably specific and precise. 'Destination Dungeness' describes how in childhood he made bullets for a deer rifle, while in 'Curious Rarity' he unexpectedly meets the silver buffaloberry:

I was exploring the far-eastern edge of the Granton that fateful day, along a small ephemeral stream. As the stream's watercourse reaches a slope break, there is an alluvial fan of sorts, where shrubs seemed to prosper. Many of the saskatoons and mock oranges were head high and more. . . one of the shrubs caught my sleeve with a viciously sharp thorn, a good two inches long. There were hawthorns in the area, and that was my first thought. But with its dusky, smooth-margined leaves, this was no hawthorn.

With striking clarity, 'Little Bluestem and the Geography of Fascination' explicates theories of plant distribution and further exemplifies Gayton's delight in nature:

I could be entertained for hours if I were handed a stack of distribution maps on transparent plastic sheets, all to the same scale. If they were stiff enough, I could shuffle them like cards, and one by one place them over each other, to see if the five-lined skink might confess to some clandestine geographical relationship with the Kirtland's warbler. Or the three-tip sagebrush with the stinkbug, and so on.

A happy scientist, this. 'Little Bluestem' also illustrates Gayton's appreciation for different ways of knowing. He classifies students of plant life as either lab coats 'who refuse to look at a plant until it's been through a Waring blender' or cowboy hats. After one of the former identifies not one but three kinds of photosynthesis, it turns out that 'these different biochemical groups...fit nicely with one of the cowboys' pet categories—cool-season and warm-season grasses.' Academic study and field experience illuminate the text. Gayton finds such completion satisfying, even hopeful.

Politically, he has followed a path familiar to his and my generation, from conservative upbringing to more radical adulthood. Unlike many of our peers, however, he is not sour on his young self, not embittered and humourless. Although he despairs over industrial society's ruination of the planet, he is always constructive, sustained by the Earth's ingenious resilience and beauty. As well, the decades have mercifully ended his estrangement (rooted in Vietnam) from his father. 'A Schooner in Memory' shows the two travelling together, with Gayton relishing his own inherited landscape—physical, intellectual, emotional.

Other stories in *Man Facing West* surprise the reader with new first person narrators, such as 'Henri Bonpland, an obscure Parisian botanist specializing in tropical palms' of the early 19th century, and with third-person tales of (among others) a Spanish priest, a dry-lander on a Pacific beach, a Yukon geologist and a Texas accountant who has never seen a butterfly. I wish that this narrative mix had been expressed in the book's design. The pages are cleanly laid out, but a fresh typeface or other visual distinction for these differing viewpoints would have added pleasure. And why not give story titles on each right-hand page, instead of endlessly repeating the book's name? 'Gliding in the Pleistocene' is the best of this second group. Full disclosure: time-travel usually produces in me an eye-rolling *Oh yeah?* Two pages in, though, I was completely taken. The energy

of the intertwined story-lines is irresistible, the voices strong and both land- and airscapes are imagined with Gaytonian clarity. When the daring paleontologists fly into their old and newfound land, the author seems to envy their wild chance to synthesize its knowledge with their own. Gayton's admirable and unusual book is all about that continual openness to learning and to action.

Another hard-to-classify book, as implied by its mixed-genre title, is Anne Sorbie's *Memoir of a Good Death: A Novel*. It begins,

Have you ever wondered about the moment of your own death? I rarely did, but in the months that preceded mine I felt as if I'd been severely wounded.

My father died on January 27, 2001, and my own life came to an abrupt end exactly six months later.

Initially, the tale-from-beyond-the-grave works well. Narrator Rhegan is, or was, a Calgary realtor; imagery and metaphor drawn from her trade colour her life-story. Possibly related to a bear, she has a voice that's distinctive, mordant at times, humorous:

From the moment of my conception I wondered who owned the womb I grew in, wondered at five years of age why Ed and Sarah called me *their* child, wondered at fourteen when I towered over my parents, why they thought I was a commodity they would eventually trade.

She offers this wry life-summary: 'I had legally married and divorced five men before I died at the age of thirty-seven. Sarah and Ed were married for forty-three years. I married for the first time at twenty-one and that merger ended before a year had gone by.'

A second narrator is Rhegan's mother, Sarah, whose chapters (8 of 32) are written in the second person. Sorbie handles this well, providing the two women's alternating views, loving and judgmental, of grief. The voices work together as the two struggle with the loss of husband/father Ed and with the lure of their own deaths. They try to move into a shared future through a canoe trip on the Bow River, while each revisits her own difficult history. Sarah says,

You rode your bike from Bowness to Tenth Street and walked out to the middle of the low span. Even during the month of May, there simply is not enough water to warrant an attempt. You decided quickly that a jumper might seriously injure herself on the rocks covering the river-bed. The last thing you want is to be confined in a living shell because you broke your neck or back as the result of a dive into a too-shallow stream.

In the novel's final third, Sorbie offers vivid, detailed descriptions of canoeing and of the land- and waterscapes the narrators meet:

After three quarters of an hour of silent zigzagging through gravel bars, we pulled out to change positions. I didn't want Sarah to be at the helm when we reached the Highwood. There weren't any significant rapids but the standing waves had to be negotiated head on. Each river folded in on the other at the conjunction like ingredients suspended in a mixing bowl.

And, later, this:

Bleak images of cold rock and frigid water inhabited my mind that afternoon. Even when the Seebe-Exshaw area is hot, there's a coldness about the place. Maybe it's caused by great gusts of glacial air resident in the gaping holes in the mountains—updrafts from dead-end mine shafts. Perhaps the disruption of the natural flow of the river gives the region a stilted feel.

Memoir of a Good Death deals with important themes—not only loss but also home, dishonesty, ownership, the limits to knowing another person, the need for love, the terrible strength of habit. However, not even the vivid descriptions combined with strong main characters can carry the novel's weight. Wordiness, excess detail and incident, unnecessary minor characters, and overuse of first person make the story difficult to navigate and the novel is far too long. The fearful climax too, though brilliantly visualized, is problematic. From the outset, readers know that the bear is coming, yet as the pages turn there is ever more explicit foreshadowing. A subtler strategy might have been to take readers nearly by surprise into sorrow.

Nevertheless, at its best, this writing has the assurance that can only come from intense knowledge of one's material. In exploring texture, sound, temperature, movement, Sorbie uses her poet's skills to awaken the reader's sensory perception.

—Cynthia Flood