

**Pasha Malla**, *People Park*, House of Anansi, 2012

**Teresa McWhirter**, *Five Little Bitches*, Anvil, 2012

In 2006, Douglas Coupland wrote an essay for his *New York Times* blog arguing that CanLit is a stagnant field, exclusively representative of an increasingly non-existent facet of Canadian life. Coupland was drawing a distinction between literature produced in Canada (like his writing) and capital-C CanLit as historically constructed by the literary establishment. CanLit, Coupland argued, is depressing and rural and bleak, and as such it does not represent the realities of contemporary Canadian life.

How lucky for us that Coupland was so wrong! While sometimes, like around Canada Reads time, it can feel as though Canadian literature overwhelmingly celebrates historical narratives of rural Prairie or Maritime life, contemporary Canadian literature is as varied as any other national literature. Stories of the urban and the modern predominate. Pasha Malla's *People Park* and Teresa McWhirter's *Five Little Bitches* are two such examples. In their contrasting examinations of the contemporary urban landscape, Malla and McWhirter probe questions of isolation and loneliness even for those seemingly deeply entrenched within idealized communities. For Malla, the perfect cityscape cannot protect its citizens from malaise; for McWhirter, the sisterhood of an all-girl punk band is not immune to unravelling. For both authors, the urban jungle is a backdrop for rich contemporary narratives.

106

Pasha Malla's latest offering is a speculative novel about urban dystopia that asks whether it is possible to construct a perfect city. *People Park* is set in an island city, connected to the mainland only by the forebodingly named Guardian Bridge. The community is entirely self-sufficient and residents rarely leave (the mayor, whose insularity is a point of pride, asserts that she sees no reason to live elsewhere). The community is celebrating the excitement of the Silver Jubilee of People Park, a central, idyllic gathering place that is both the heart of the community and symbolic of progress in this unnamed fictional municipality.

Of course, as in any good utopia, progress isn't really progress, and around the edges of the city we have a sense that things are falling apart. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly clear that the centre of this community cannot hold. A magician of sorts—an illustrationist, in the parlance of the text—named Raven has come to town ostensibly to provide a stirring and dramatic centrepiece to the festivities, but really he becomes the catalyst of the city's unravelling. As a dystopian tale, the progress of the narrative is relatively predictable and

straightforward. As I read through *People Park*, however, I found myself discovering layered complexity not in the narrative itself but in the echoes I saw in the city around me.

I am a recent transplant to the Vancouver area and with my semi-outsider status I found it almost impossible not to weave Vancouver in between the lines of Malla's nameless city—with its dependence on a bridge connection to the world beyond (but a deep-seated distrust of those who live outside the privileged city's borders), its tourist-trap neighbourhood of gas lamps populated by disdainful and impatient residents, its abandoned and impoverished underclass, and a sense of self-satisfaction in the creation of what they imagine to be a socially just wonderland that actually leaves out so many. It's a place that thinks itself ideal but allows the marginalized to become ever more marginal. Even the city's fate at the end of the novel is not dissimilar to predictions of Vancouver's own.

So is this a cautionary tale for Canada's youngest 'City of the End of Things'? The intention behind the novel is not altogether clear. Fans of Pasha Malla's careful, deliberate prose as witnessed in his celebrated *The Withdrawal Method* will be surprised by *People Park*, a messy, sprawling novel. It features a huge cast of characters and a number of unresolved plotlines, and there are probably narrative portions that could have been excised to deliver a more streamlined and focused text. As a result, the depth of the novel's message is diluted and its nature murky. But the book is also pleasurable in its excess, even if occasionally bewildering (the reader can feel as much an outsider at times as the character Kellogg Poole and his children). Malla intentionally does not orient us in this text, but leaves us to discover the world as it emerges. Brave choices abound here, and even those that do not altogether work are evidence of a welcome overreaching in a complex, creative fiction.

Teresa McWhirter's drug-fueled tour novel of hard-living punk princesses has *People Park*'s scope and breadth with a much more focused narrative and cast of characters. In *Five Little Bitches*, we are on the road with Wet Leather, an all-girl punk outfit from Vancouver who are out to take the boy's club of hardcore music by storm. As readers, we follow the ladies of Wet Leather from their beginnings as a group of women just looking to jam, to an internationally successful concern. Driven by the tragic desire for attention of lead singer Maxine and the steady musical chops of guitarist Fanta, the women are by turns emotional disasters and punk wonders. Whether or not they can keep it together—either the band collectively or their fragile selves individually—is the suspenseful, lingering question of the narrative.

In some ways, *Five Little Bitches* is an estrogen-fueled response to the testosterone-soaked failure in the pages of Michael Turner's 1993 verse novel *Hard Core Logo*. The women of *Wet Leather* roll just as hard as the men of *Hard Core Logo* do, and they date characters who could be analogues for Turner's male musicians. In both texts, the road weighs heavily on the soul and the musicians pay a steep cost. In both texts, as readers, we wonder if the price is worth it.

Refreshingly though, where *Hard Core Logo* was largely about male competition, *Five Little Bitches* is a novel about female friendship, and it both celebrates the strength of the bonds possible between women and questions the social structures that make female friendship challenging. The women in the novel find it easier to forgive male trespasses against them than female ones, and this becomes fodder for McWhirter's questioning (but never judgmental) gaze. Likewise, the varied and often problematic ways the women represent and espouse feminism, or fail to, provide a space for critical questioning in the novel. McWhirter is not easy on her fallible and flawed protagonists, and she does not idealize them. These are not perfect women embodying perfect politics. As a result, their travails feel honest and it is easy to find empathy for the characters.

108

This is not a novel for everyone, and sensitive readers may find McWhirter's raw prose difficult to take; the women are punk rockers and use vernacular appropriate to their world and experience. The stark title seems downright quaint juxtaposed with the vulgarity of the text. At one point, a character describes her boring sexual relationship with her ex-boyfriend by saying, 'Getting my period was more exciting, on days with heavy flow.' These women are vulgar; it's part of the performance of an aggressive femininity that they embody, and it renders them much more honest and realistic as a result. They fit their world and have been moulded by it; the result is a novel with dialogue that rings true even (and perhaps especially) when it is, occasionally, uncomfortable in its truth.

Mostly though, this novel is an awful lot of fun. McWhirter's clear love for her protagonists comes through in the narrative and she delights in weaving their stories. They are angry and flawed and sometimes broken, but they are also strong women whose capacity for love—primarily for each other—overshadows their shortcomings. As readers we root for *Wet Leather* to succeed against unlikely odds, and when the women struggle with the demons of booze, drugs and men, we root for them, too. The book's playfulness extends to the form of the text itself, with each page a sensory overload of marginalia that makes the experience of reading feel more like flipping through a scrapbook than reading traditional prose fiction. The re-

sult is a novel that feels as loud, as raucous, and as sexually charged as a Wet Leather concert.

— *Brenna Clarke Gray*