

**Heather Birrell**, *Mad Hope*, Coach House Books, 2012

**Dorothy Speak**, *Reconciliation*, Dorothy Speak, 2012

On the cover of Heather Birrell's *Mad Hope*, Annabel Lyon says this 'gorgeously written' collection belongs 'in the short story pantheon with Alice Munro, Lisa Moore and Zsuzsi Gartner.' That placement makes some sense. Birrell has Munro's clear photographic eye combined with Moore's graceful narrative and Gartner's quirky humour. These stories explore the broad themes of life and love, family, friendship, betrayal and death, but Birrell's settings and situations are specific and peculiar, and her voice is precise and authentic. From a Canadian classroom to an Ecuadorian jungle, she examines human behaviour in its most mundane or macabre extremes, always with a poignancy that creates reader empathy.

In 'Frogs,' Naadiya, a Somali Muslim girl, approaches her science teacher to ask for help in terminating her pregnancy. Her teacher, formerly a doctor in Ceaușescu's pronatalist regime, agrees to help the young woman. The story circles around the helplessness Vasile felt before escaping from Romania and coming to Canada, the victimization of women under political, religious or patriarchal domination, and the casual exploitation of vulnerable creatures. He thinks of recent conversations with his daughter who accuses him of having been complicit in Ceaușescu's schemes, and recalls his wife's courage in procuring an illegal abortion in Romania, going to jail while refusing to give the name of the woman who assisted her.

As a teacher, Vasile leads his students through the dissections of frogs 'as quickly and clinically as possible,' and in response to his daughter's accusations, he acknowledges that the frogs most of all represent the horror, pain and guilt of his past in Romania: '*...more than anything, I remember the frogs. I dream them in their many incarnations and contortions. I weep for them the way I cannot for the women, for the babies born half-formed or badly loved.*' The frogs, imported in 'droves,' were injected with the women's urine to test for pregnancy. '[T]he beauty was that the frog[s] remained alive and could be used again.' Their fortitude meant their enslavement; ultimately, the frogs were 'worked... to death.' The image of those tortured creatures resonates throughout these stories. Children and adults alike witness murder, suicide, the sudden deaths of friends and family, yet survive and endure. 'The heart is pretty central,' Vasile instructs his biology students as they dissect their frogs, and this statement describes Vasile's response to Naadiya as well as Birrell's approach to the people in her stories. The frog image on the book's cover is iconic in relation to pregnancy, vulnerability and choices about life and death.

The question of pregnancy, seeking it or terminating it, is the focus of other stories. 'No One Else Really Wants to Listen' takes place in an online chat group where expectant mothers share stories, opinions and advice. The pro-life and pro-choice arguments are trotted out in surprisingly articulate accounts (unlikely, perhaps, in an actual chat group), which illustrate the intense emotions, hopes, disappointments, blame and anger that so often colour judgment in what is an always intensely complicated and usually unresolved discussion. Sometimes humorous, sometimes heart-breaking, the voices are vital and persuasive. Both the genuinely charitable and coldly inhumane responses are adroitly presented, illustrating the topic's complexity.

In 'Wanted Children,' a childless couple struggles with disappointment and despair after failed attempts to conceive followed by a pregnancy that ends in miscarriage. Beth sees strollers as 'little buggies of anguish' and wants to 'spray-paint their protective sides, slash their UV-blocking visors.' Her husband proposes they go on a trip to Cuyabeno National Park in the Amazon where Beth encounters and longs for a village girl's nameless child. She inquires about the possibility of taking her home but is rejected. She wonders why people's wounds can't match up and notes 'how rarely people's plans and yearnings find their proper, perfect form.'

Despite desperate circumstances and terrible timing, her people usually find ways to cope. In 'My Friend Taisie,' Thomas supports his friend Taisie through pregnancy and childbirth as a way of dealing with the suicide of his partner. Taisie remarks, 'Just living, it can be an accomplishment, can't it?' In the last story of this collection, 'Impossible to Die in Your Dreams,' the setting is a wedding with the story told through the bride's sister and grandmother's recalling a lifetime of memories involving abuse, betrayal and disappointment. The overall tone of the story, however, is hopeful, even joyful, concluding with the bride placing her bouquet on her grandmother's lap, a friend telling an off-key joke and the grandmother laughing and knowing in her heart that 'timing or no, this is good.'

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The book jacket for Dorothy Speak's self-published *Reconciliation* also compares her storytelling to that of Alice Munro as well as Joyce Carol Oates. Like Birrell, Speak covers the territory of family, marriage and friendship, but her perspective is very different. Highlighting the minutiae of daily activities, she relentlessly reveals the pettiness and self-absorption of her characters and their failure both to live up to their own potential and to form good relationships with their partners, friends or children. It is difficult to like any of these people, yet Speak brings the reader inside their heads and hearts.

She forces readers to recognize circumstances and impulses that shape her characters' unfortunate choices and lack of action—all of which lead to inevitably tragic outcomes. As outlandish as many of the betrayals and infidelities may be, the stories are told with accuracy of description and detail that make them believable.

In 'The Opposite of Truth,' Benta meets intermittently with her cancer-ridden friend Lourdes, and the two exchange insults about their attitudes towards wigs versus hats for cancer victims. Lourdes, who has slept with Benta's ex-husband, takes up with her friend's current lover, causing Benta to spray-paint obscenities on the man's car and then make an appointment to see, and perhaps seduce, Lourdes's healer. The narrator tells us, 'The reason their friendship has endured is that they've always felt free to tell each other the opposite of the truth.' Like most relationships in these stories, this friendship consists of entertaining dialogue and considerable drama but lacks any depth of compassion or empathy.

Dark undertones lurk in all these stories. 'A Penny to Save' starts with 'a queer feeling in the room' when the father lifts his five-year-old daughter from the table and threatens to smear butter on her belly. Later, outside the home, the father's friend lures the girl into sexual foreplay while in the background her brother practices his yoyo to the steady incantation of nursery rhymes.

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In the final story, 'The Prime of His Life,' 65-year-old Purdy, who has devoted his life to indulging his self-absorbed wife Madonna, caters to her dying wishes. Meanwhile, their son Winslow, after a lifetime of abuse and neglect, refuses to see his mother. Purdy brings Madonna designer clothes from the extensive wardrobe she has purchased through years of frenzied spending and perpetuates the 'charade' that she is not a patient in a terminal care ward. She shrinks to a grotesque caricature of herself: 'Her earlobes drooped under the weight of heavy costume jewellery.... On her shrunken feet, her shoes floated.' Her shakily applied lipstick, rouge and mascara have 'a burlesque effect.' She 'stood out like a Christmas tree. It was what she wanted. She needed to be noticed.' Winslow refuses to go to his mother's funeral and sums her up as a 'fourteen-carat phoney.' Purdy ultimately realizes that it was a sin to have been so enamoured of his vain wife that he has ignored and failed his son. He concludes that he 'had displayed an egregious lack.'

One way or another, most of the people in this collection—narcissistic, self-serving, exploitive or merely foolish—display an egregious lack. Yet Speak's exquisite attention to the bleak, painful details of their lives leaves the reader wishing that there could be some kind of deliverance or, as the book's title suggests, reconciliation.

With an echo of Margaret Atwood, whose blurb on the back of the book describes Speak as ‘a wonderful new short story writer,’ two of these stories suggest that hope may be found not through human interaction but in the natural environment. ‘Authenticity’ concludes, ‘The light thrown off the lake is transcendent, devastating, redemptive,’ and the final sentence in ‘Surcease of Sorrow’ is ‘The river’s steadfastness, its neutrality, its senseless beauty strengthened and soothed her.’ Albeit remote, there is some sense of hope here.

Any Canadian woman who writes short stories is likely to be compared to Alice Munro, but Munro is in a class of her own. Nonetheless, these two books contain good stories, carefully written, that describe recognizable and moving human portraits and interactions. Birrell’s writing is more powerfully engaging than Speak’s, but both writers have produced stimulating short-story collections that merit attention.

— *Carol Matthews*