

Read All Over reviews, January

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Onion Man Kathryn Mockler Tightrope Books, 2011. 130 pgs.

I remember a time built for cynical anthems, when I would mope and skulk about in a moribund part of town with an audio cassette copy of Joy Division's *Unknown Pleasures* piping in my ears (I had the original LP). Gritty. Urban. Complicated. Hopeless. This is precisely the timbre of Mockler's episodic collection of industrial one-stanza poems, every brittle-shard moment tinged with the grey monotony of working in a canning factory, adventures run afoul, a mother's bouts with alcoholism, a frequently tactless co-worker boyfriend, and the feeling that there is really nothing much to hope for so might as well sneer and bear it.

Onion Man is not the kind of blue-collar romanticism enamoured with its own premise (which is sometimes the failing of Charles Bukowski), but an earnest elegy to the kind of melancholic anxiety experienced by GenX in that fuzzy border area between adolescence and adulthood. Spotted with plenty of decade specific bric-a-brac and London haunts, our narrator always seems as though the prospect of choice is always cut down by some painful circumstance.

And, who is the Onion Man? A resigned factory worker of 40 years, or is he more like a real onion: a complex series of layers with no centre?

Apart from being an anti-nostalgic piece of nostalgia, this is stark southwestern Ontario realism in its necessarily rawest form.

Cinema and Colour: The Saturated Image Paul Coates Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 178 pgs.

"Tint or hue? What's colour to you?"

-The Red Krayola, *Color Theory No. 4*

Colours are not innocuous; they are saturated with ideological meaning and cultural significance, just as the psychology of colour is frequently adopted by branding experts in the design of corporate logos. We respond both consciously and unconsciously to the triggers of colour and what they may connote.

Paul Coates takes us into this variegated domain of colour as employed in cinema, and how our culturally conditioned assumptions about colour's meaning generally operates according to a dialectical relationship. However, as Coates tells us, what we may take to be culturally and ideologically embedded meanings with respect to colour may not always stand up to those meanings, colours themselves maintaining a kind of ambivalent or ambiguous meaning in any semiotic relationship.

This referential "slippage" is best seen in European auteur films. Coates identifies the revelatory and occasionally non-revelatory nature of colour in film by tracing the development of theory that has engaged it, from modernism to postmodernism. Those

of the filmic persuasion who thrill to the names of Eisenstein, Godard, Bergman, and Antonioni will find in this book a veritable trove of insights through the filter of colours. What we may take for granted in the employment of colour in film is not precisely what we may come to expect, and it is to Coates' credit that his study takes aim at what has long been a lacuna in film scholarship.

The Protestant Whore: Courtesan Narrative and Religious Controversy in England, 1650-1750 Alison Conway University of Toronto Press, 2010. 291 pgs.

The title made me choke on my coffee. I confess a guilty fascination with polemic and vitriol, and this tumultuous period of English history and febrile religious controversy is given a lucid, penetrating treatment through the lens of the courtesan narrative.

Eleanor 'Nell' Gwyn, King Charles II's mistress, features as a kind of literal synecdoche of the burning religious questions of the period, and a moral flashpoint for polemical treatises – more than simply a *flagello dei principi*. The wake of the Restoration was bristling with scandals, plots, intrigue and a grasping for self-identification. A highly heterodox period, the use of the term "whore" is a convergence of several pejorative signifiers of the time such as Catholic, traitor, and bawdiness. Yet, the use of whore does challenge the conventions of the time in problematizing the relationship of the role of women and authority, as well as the notion of freedom. Conway filters these unsteady and metamorphosing ideas by an appeal to the courtesan and courtesan-related literature of the time, honouring her commitment to employing Clifford Geertz's idea of 'thick description.' By appealing to the narrative literary dimension, this furnishes the reader with a more profound sense of self-identification without resorting to brute historical periodization (which Foucault warns us against).

A biography of Nell Gwyn, or any royal mistress, could only produce a flattened image that disregards the broader cultural foundations and restrict interpretive latitude. The critical approach of using a literary lens on history brings out the palimpsest of the time's aspirations rather than rely on bland, linear description. And this is precisely what Conway does: broadens the field of questions that understands the pivotal role of the text and its relationship to the anxieties of the time.

Collections and Objections: Aboriginal Material Culture in Southern Ontario Michelle A. Hamilton McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010. 308 pgs.

The perennial and complex issues of First Nations artifacts with respect to excavation, interpretation, display and repatriation are among the most ethically perplexing in museum studies. Questions of collection practices in curatorial education and training have become central to a debate that concerns the identity of stakeholders when we speak of archaeological sites, intellectual property rights, and the representation of artifacts. One organization's intention to obtain and display artifacts for educational purposes might be at odds with the rights of those to whom these objects are cultural property.

Hamilton charts a meticulous history of collection practices in the Southern Ontario region, noting how attitudes have changed to reflect the pressing need to involve members of the Aboriginal and First Nations communities. Although the historical record has shown gradual improvements in anthropological protocols and sensitivity to First Nations claims, the cluster of issues are far from resolved. Even among First

Nations groups there is disagreement over how their material culture is to be used and interpreted.

Some, for example, employ archaeological practices to substantiate land claims, while others assert that their ancestors want descendants to locate remains and other objects as an instructional reminder of traditional burial practices. The question whether or not First Nations artifacts and remains are being exploited for financial or academic gain, even under the auspices of scientific objectivity (which can itself be problematic in the way it may impose a “white standard” upon the appreciation of First Nations culture) cannot be set aside. Hamilton’s close and fine-grained study, supplemented by photographs of artifacts and illustrations of historical collection practices, gives us profound insight in the interpretation of material culture in a book of high quality scholarship.

Elegies Madeline Bassnett Frog Hollow Press, 2011. 32 pgs.

There is a mournful air to Bassnett’s svelte collection of non-rhyming couplets that enjoin the reader on a quiet tour of disquieting exhibits. Whether it be embarking upon the conceptually rich “Passage” designating the end rather than the beginning of a journey, emotional heart failure, the stubborn and senseless cleaving to last minutes of life, or new shades of loss so eloquently articulated yet so universal.

One poem in particular (*Seduction*) upset me in only the way good poetry can speak directly to a reader’s experience: as a devoted cat person who lets his feline children outdoors, I was right there with the poet’s anxiety in calling out the cat’s name into the tangle of dusk trees, expecting the worst (and are we not in fact seduced by Nature into inscribing upon it the gendered feminine mystique so perilous, yet itself burdened with our own misreading instead of understanding that nature simply, in the Spinozist way, simply “natures” itself without need of our inscription?).

Such “gifts” as we lay upon the world are impossible. In a nod to how poetry perhaps ought to be, the lines are interpretive landscapes condensed in a nearly aphoristic style—thematically coherent yet dense with lurid meaning. It is worthy to note the careful craftsmanship of this limited edition chapbook that speaks to the “book as artisan’s object”: hand-sewn and with special care to both materials and font for those who are, like myself, prone to fawning over such details.

Exquisitely written and constructed.