Coming Attractions 10
edited by Mark Anthony Jarman
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Reviewed by Ronald Charles Epstein

For the past thirty years, Oberon Press has annually assembled trios of promising authors and brought them to the next level – from the periodical to the book. Since alumni have included well-known authors such as Rohinton Mistry, Sharon Butala and Barry Dempster, readers are encouraged to check out each new edition for rising superstars and first-class fiction.

Alexander MacLeod, the first author featured in the present volume, teaches at Halifax’s St. Mary’s University, but his fiction is inspired by his childhood in the industrial city of Windsor, Ontario.

“Light Lifting,” a story about a bricklaying crew, does not explicitly deal with that city. For outsiders, the names of “new subdivisions. Southwood Lakes. Castlepoint. Elmwood.” (17) could be in any locality. The place is merely a stage for cleverly discerned class conflicts. JC, a born-again veteran/ex-convict, tries to explain his picturesque Christian lifestyle to a suburbanite who is “creeped out” by his tattoos. Crew boss Tom profusely apologizes to his startled man, but warns his subordinate, “You ever do that again . . . and you’re gone.” (14) Tom demonstrates the author’s unconventionally political class consciousness. He picks a fight in a bar with a city work crew that he dismisses as lazy unionists – no “solidarity forever” here.

“Adult Beginner I” is set in Windsor; its swim instructor protagonists jump from the Waterfront Holiday Inn roof into the Detroit River, near the Ambassador Bridge. On the surface, the story traces Stace’s attempts to overcome a traumatic swim lesson at a Nova Scotia beach. An undercurrent of stupidity is apparent – in addition to the aforementioned diving jackasses, there is Stace’s father, who missed the warning sign “Use Caution: Severe Undertow” (34), and her mother, who ignored the ocean’s turbulence.

Gimmickary mars “Wonder About Parents.” The tale of Montreal parents who transport their sick infant to their Windsor family is interrupted by references to Hans Zinsser’s book Rats, Lice and History. If Zinsser were alive, he would not seek co-credit.

Toronto writer Wasela Hiyate, a former Caribbean television producer, knows enough about her Trinidad & Tobago setting to make “Travel Is So Broadening” credible. Unfortunately, her account of Chris and Nita’s trip to the latter’s West Indian homeland is unmemorable. Her observation that North Americans romanticize Third World poverty comes across more as fact than as insight.

Fiction writers who are not great narrators can create better ones. “Man on a Bicycle” introduces readers to a young Toronto girl of Indo-Caribbean descent. She observes her family with multicultural insight, noting that her mother craved “pomegranate and ripe pineapple when she was pregnant with Amina” but “had to settle for bananas with me, since I was born in Canada” (93). Her lively spirit encourages readers to follow her tale of her older sister’s rebelliousness.
“Lost Star” may refer to the child of expatriates Belle and Ethan who died at birth. Their attempts to dull the pain with work and touring are too tentatively explored to be truly compelling. The story’s ending seems to inspire a sequel, but readers may turn away before then.

Vancouver’s Théodora Armstrong crosses genres in “Whale Stories.” The story begins as a portrait of William, a young boy who is trying to cope with his new life in his mother’s “bed ’n breakfast” on BC’s Sunshine Coast. He accidentally traps a feral canine near a tidal pool, lets it die and concocts a story about a stinking whale corpse to keep his little sister, Miriam, out of the area. This cover-up of a deadly accident evokes the atmosphere of a crime story. Fortunately for the boy, the victim is one of “those damned dogs” (110), a despised, and possibly discarded, stray.

“Fishtail” bothers, rather than engages, the reader. The description of protagonist Ted’s encounter with a truck leaves one wondering whether it hits his car or merely bypasses it. That vehicle “passes him on the left . . . it overtakes him,” but he feels its “impact” (139).

“Thanks to Karen” features a slacker Penticton waitress who rescues Annette, her successful Vancouver sister. The plot seems to champion failures, at the expense of their more successful peers. The loser who turns hero is a fairly common literary device that should be used with care.

This collection may attract the casual reader or borrower, but probably not the serious buyer.  

Ronald Charles Epstein reviewed several previous editions of Coming Attractions.