Light Lifting (stories)
by Alexander MacLeod

Reviewed by J.M. Bridgeman

Alexander MacLeod’s Scotiabank Giller Prize–nominated Light Lifting is a collection of seven short stories, for the most part about young people taking risks. Some of the risks are athletic (running, swimming, diving), some are social (parenting, working a summer job, making friends), and some are more emotional, psychological; about grieving, passing through wolf packs of threatening teens, or choosing to enter the dragon’s dark cave in order to do the right thing. The stories evoke for me that famous line by Earle Birney, “that day, the last of my youth, on the last of our mountains.” They are stories of transitions. Narrators, both male and female, cope with fear and impulses, devolving from discipline into loss of control, from civilization into brawls on the street or in a pub, the flashing purple and red emergency lights signalling the passage from innocence into experience.

I assigned myself the task of reading one story per morning and found that I was hurrying to get to them, anxious to read more. I especially liked the stories about characters I do not often read about: athletes (runners in “The Miracle Mile,” swimmers in “Adult Beginner I”), a pre-teen delivery boy (“The Loop”), construction workers (“Light Lifting”), and boys growing up in a family of boys in a declining urban neighborhood (“Good Kids”). Only one story presents a different point of view. With its older, confused male narrator, “The Number Three” seems to be about the loss of faith, about corporate betrayal, economically and personally, and about miscommunication across generations. But the slightly uncharitable attitude of the main character’s daughter sets a different tone; anger. Anger as a part of grief. Is “The Number Three” the name of a highway? Perhaps that was the problem; I couldn’t orient myself because, unlike the narrator, I didn’t know where I was. I love stories where the setting is specified, urban and yet specific, appropriately borderline, often on the boundary, with its train tunnel, bridge, river linking Windsor and Detroit.

My personal favourite is the first story in the collection, “Miracle Mile,” which hooks the reader with the Mike Tyson / Evander Holyfield fight, the one with the ear-biting incident, and incorporates the Roger Bannister / John Landy “miracle mile” in Vancouver in 1954. The story explores the physiology and psychology of competitive running. Jamie Burns and Mikey Campbell, who grew up together, are disciplined athletes, training buddies, pacing, and “‘rigging,’ short for rigor mortis” (37), winning, losing, quitting, losing control. Mikey, the narrator, shares insights; he muses about the image captured by the finish-line camera, Landy checking over his left shoulder as Bannister passes him on the right. “People forget that Richard Ferguson, a Canadian, finished third in the Miracle Mile. He’s the important missing character, the one who didn’t make it into the statue. Ferguson was the threat coming up from behind; he was the guy Landy feared” (38).

Using sports history as pop cultural reference points to which to peg new narratives works for me – Mike Tyson before and after tattoos (9) – but the suburb’s first rental home as “a Bermuda Triangle for hopeful people” (172), Lee Iacocca and the auto industry (197) and Shoppers Drug Mart (143) in other stories are also fine. As Mikey says, “We have to scrounge for meaning wherever we can find it and there’s no way to separate our faith from our desperation” (39). I like the way the
stories contrast the many different worlds available to us, from the old lady serving tuna sandwiches to the “unavoidable” eruptions in streets and bars. These are stories about the thin line between winning and losing, between living and dying, in which: "We are what we want most and there are no miracles without desire" (40).

J.M. Bridgeman writes from British Columbia.
jmbridgeman@uniserve.com

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