Best Canadian Stories 10
edited by John Metcalf

Reviewed by Gillian Harding-Russell

In Best Canadian Stories 10, editor John Metcalf brings together a plethora of new stories recently published in literary journals, and presents them in an order loosely based on shades of tone and a balance of themes. Certainly a range of voice and tone may be identified in this collection. Whereas Patricia Young’s somewhat quirky story about a child abduction, “Daytrip,” is told in the third person, Laura Boudreau’s “Poses” is spoken in the first person by a precocious pre-adolescent girl who responds to a Facebook lure. Although Julie Bookers’s “Huck” also uses the first person, its speakers shift among a host of abusive and abused characters to dramatic and ironic effect. By contrast, Annabel Lyon in “Summit,” Cathy Stonehouse in “A Little Winter,” and most of the other writers in the collection prefer the versatility of a third-person speaker.

Voice and tone in the third-person stories differ as much as do points of view: whereas Lyon’s account of a student demonstration on a university campus and Stonehouse’s story set in an army barracks are stylistically as expansive and viscerally charged as the worlds they reflect, Stephen Gauer’s “Hold Me Now,” about a young gay man who is beaten up, is told in simple language in which the characters’ unexpected changes of heart appear all the more pronounced. Zsuzsi Bartnik’s style in “Summer of the Flesh Eaters” is as difficult as it is playful and parodic, with its Darwinian parallels and presentation of cultural expectations of male gender roles in a summer cottage setting. The portrayal of the young mother and children’s book illustrator in Shaena Lambert’s “A Small Haunting” is psychologically layered while adding a minimal amplification on (if not explanation for) ghosts. Also disturbing is Marjorie Celona’s “This Is When I Love You Most,” told from the point of view of a seemingly delinquent seventeen-year-old girl. Finally, small ironies and gentle nudges of humour in Rebecca’s “Sweet,” about a new grandmother who leaves her spouse to fend for himself while she visits her grandson, provide a wry close to the collection.

For an example of a dramatic highlight, take the scene in which the pre-adolescent female speaker in “Poses” addresses the child pornography–seeking voyeur on Facebook and agrees to be photographed in revealing poses. She also agrees to bring her friend, Alice, in on the deal:

So I think, what do I care if a bunch of nerds see these? It’s not like that does anything to me. I’m not an idiot. I know what I’m doing. And yeah, Alice will totally do it too. I’m her best friend. She trusts me. But the point is your ad said that if I brought in another girl I’d get paid more, and you never said how much. (27)

The teen speaker displays some savvy in her questions to the contact about the promised extra payment if she brings her friend in on the deal.

One of my favourite stories in the collection, Stephen Gauer’s “Hold Me Now,” has moments of epiphany when the father of the gay man who has been brutally killed in Stanley Park meets his son’s murderer after he has pleaded guilty and filled his sentence three years later. Mr Brenner has tracked
down young Curtis (underage at the time of the murder) to his house and confronts the boy with the seemingly unanswerable “why he did it.” “I think we should talk,” Brenner opens up the conversation:

“Talking is good.”
“But I don’t have to talk to you. Even a year from now I don’t have to talk to you. Three years, that’s my time. Three years of my fucking life.”
Curtis finished his cigarette and flicked it into the street.
Brenner sighed. He was very close to the boy, close enough to touch. Why didn’t Curtis move away? (111)

By Curtis’s reluctance to move away from his accuser, we sense his remorse and admission of guilt. So when Curtis’s father comes out of the house, knocks Brenner down and kicks him in the ribs, calling his dead son a “faggot,” and Curtis tries to stop his father, the reader becomes aware of the source of Curtis’s prejudice against gays and may even entertain the possibility of the boy’s transformation into a person with empathy.

Another story with a subtly beguiling twist is Marjorie Celona’s tenderly ironic “This is When I Love You Most.” Seventeen-year-old Bobbie is not trusted to stay home alone while her mother goes on vacation in Florida, and must stay, unhappily, with neighbours on whom her mother has presumed. When her mother contacts her, it is not to find out how she is doing so much as for her own selfish reason for extending her vacation:

“I didn’t bring enough underwear, Mom. Or socks.”
Bobbie’s mother coughs into the phone. “I asked you if you’d packed right. Borrow some from the girl.”
“She’s a lot smaller.”
“For Christ’s sake, Bobbie. Okay, okay. Come on, talk to me. Miss you. What have you been doing?” (147)

After her mother changes the subject from Bobbie’s discontent, Bobbie asks her outright to come home, only to learn that her mother’s new boyfriend, who wants to attend a greyhound race, takes precedence.

This collection has much to offer in variety and style, some of the stories perhaps even worthy of posterity-setting standards. Only time can tell. 

Gillian Harding-Russell has published three poetry collections, most recently I forgot to tell you (Thistledown, 2007). She has a chapbook Poems for the Summer Solstice (Leaf Press) and Stories of Snow (Alfred Gustav) appearing later this year. Poems are forthcoming in Carousel, Windsor Review, The Antigonish Review and The Literary Review of Canada. She lives in Regina.