

Cabin Fever: The Best New Canadian Non-Fiction

Edited by Moira Farr and Ian Pearson

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Reviewed by Graeme Voyer

For over twenty years, the Banff Centre for the Arts has offered a program in Literary Journalism, in which journalists and other non-fiction writers participate in a month-long residency at Banff, working with editors and their colleagues to hone their writing skills. *Cabin Fever* is a collection of thirteen essays produced by participants in the program over the past six years.

These non-fiction stories are, for the most part, well written, and cover a wide range of subjects, including tree planting in British Columbia, learning French as a second language, searching for a rare blue frog in South America, and negotiating the streets of Toronto on a bicycle.

One writer took the notion of “literary journalism” a little too literally, peppering her ten-page narrative with twenty-three similes. And one or two of the essays border on the self-indulgent. But the strengths of this collection outweigh the weaknesses.

The best of these essays – those by Jonathan Garfinkel and Megan Williams stand out – vividly delineate personal experience, and then extrapolate broader themes from that experience.

For example, Garfinkel recounts a trip to Israel, where he hoped to find and write a play about a house inhabited by an Arab and a Jew, a house that a friend had told him about. What he found was a more complex and acrimonious relationship between the people in question, a relationship that becomes a metaphor for the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

Williams, a Canadian who moved to Rome, describes what it is like to drive a car in an Italian city, and relates the difficult process of acquiring an Italian driver’s licence. These experiences prompt her to reflect on the disconnect between effort and reward, the

unfairness of life, and the problem of instilling values in the young in a world that rewards bad behaviour and seems indifferent, at best, to the good.

Cabin Fever is an intriguing anthology of literary journalism well worth reading.

Graeme Voyer is a Winnipeg writer.

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