The Exile Book of Canadian Sports Stories
Edited by Priscila Uppal

Reviewed by Gillian Harding-Russell

Its publication no doubt inspired by the advent of the Canadian Olympics, this volume contains an eclectic selection of short stories in which a particular sport figures either marginally or on centre stage. Authors range from as far back as Susannah Moodie, with the excerpt “Brian, the Still-hunter” from Roughing it in the Bush, and Stephen Leacock with his “The Old, Old Story About How Five Men Went Fishing,” to such contemporary writers as Katherine Govier’s “Eternal Snow,” Steven Heighton’s “A Right Like Yours,” and Guy Vanderhaeghe’s “The Master of Disaster.” Hunting, target shooting, baseball, football, hockey, swimming, surfing, diving, and boxing are some of the sports featured. As with any good anthology, the diversity of themes and styles by different authors increases its attraction and is what will make it appealing to a wide range of readers. It will also serve as a pleasant introduction to Canadian literature through the Canadian sports story, and may already have done so for foreign visitors during the winter 2010 Olympics.

In her introduction, Uppal supplies the interesting information that, during the first modern Olympics between 1912 and 1948, the arts were celebrated along with sports, with medals awarded for works of art in five categories – architecture, literature, music, painting, and sculpture – inspired by sports. The arts component was discontinued after 1954 when it was argued that artists were professionals; but now that NHL and NBA players are allowed to participate in the Olympics, Uppal leaves us with the question whether this policy should be reconsidered.

While it was a delight to reread the classics, it was also highly enlightening to read about, among other things, the hubris of living through one’s children, as dramatized with wise irony and humour in Morley Callaghan’s “The Chiseler.” The French Canadian point of view in Roch Carrier’s much anthologized “The Hockey Sweater” may be compared with such homely literature as L.M. Montgomery’s “Natty of Blue Point,” in which petty political preferences get in the way of ethical concerns. I enjoyed the stories by Katherine Govier (“Eternal Snow”) and
Diane Schoemperlen ("Hockey Night in Canada") for their fine structure and ironic touches. Brian Fawcett’s “My Career with the Leafs” and Rudy Thauberger’s “The Goalie” have a particular ring of authenticity.

Of the more contemporary stories, Marguerite Pigeon’s “Endurance,” Priscila Uppal’s “Vertigo,” and Guy Vanderhaeghe’s “The Master of Disaster” are among my favourites. In “Endurance,” a winter biathlete persists, with mind over matter, through fatigue, frostbite, and hallucinations. We witness her seemingly hardened response to another female athlete’s breakdown in the tent while she is treated by her coach: Anick hears someone crying, and “with what is suddenly a huge effort” she turns her head:

It’s Ola, the Russian. Her short damp hair is stuck to her forehead like weeds. The team doctor is crouched beside where she’s sitting in her skinny black jumpsuit. He points at Ola’s eyes and shakes his head. Ola drools and babbles in protest. But Anick concurs: the eyes are too dark, fixed in misery. Ola’s out, thinks Anick. She’s out and her team is fucked. (237)

Priscila Uppal’s “Vertigo” is told in what could be described as “displacements,” with parts of the present submerged in the past and vice versa. The story begins with the first-person narrator’s diagnosis of “vertigo” that prevents her from taking part in Olympic sports, and her predicament as a guinea pig being researched for her curious medical condition. Like her mother who, in the midst of peeling vegetables, would look out the window at “memories,” the speaker too gets preoccupied when engaged in sports and doesn’t notice the real world around her. At her daughter’s interest in competitive diving, her mother expresses delight that she may in this way have discovered a way to “displace gravity.” An intricate line of connection is established between mother and daughter, so that when the narrator’s forehead hits the diving board and she ends up with a concussion, we are not entirely surprised to hear that her mother at the same moment of the accident had committed suicide. When the speaker remarks that in her accident she knew she had “displaced something,” the psychological truth of the story makes perfect sense. For a sports story in which a sport has to be abandoned and that features a suicide, “Vertigo” proves most energizing.

Guy Vanderhaeghe’s “The Master of Disaster” captures the pathos and brutality of youth with humour and insight. When Norman Hiller flatters Kurt Meinke into believing that boxing will make him a hero, the gullible Kurt, who has been looking for a sport that will showcase his
abilities, is only too willing to believe.

Kurt showed the mitts, self-consciously displaying them on his knees where they lay immense, red, chapped, ugly. Norman prodded the knuckles with his index finger. “Look at them knuckles, Beman!” he urged. “Like fucking ball bearings. These are lethal weapons we’re looking at. Stand back! Stand back!” he shouted theatrically, recoiling in mock alarm. “You don’t want those exploding in your face!” (308)

Norman leads Meinke on and draws the not-entirely innocent narrator into his game of deluding Meinke about his boxing abilities. At first it is pure comedy, with Norman training Meinke by having him spar against the agile coward Hop Jump. As these practices lose their appeal and begin to bore Kurt’s audience, Norman sets up a “real” boxing match with the local street fighter. The tensions and surprises in this story avoid all expectations as Kurt suddenly loses his temper and manages to win, but in his own mind feels far from victorious. The closing image of Kurt is a sadly mixed one, with him quitting school just before graduation, taking up drugs, learning how to play a guitar, and last seen hitchhiking on the highway out of town.

*Canadian Sports Stories* is a well-balanced, satisfying mix of popular stories and those less well known, told by a range of writers from the earliest days of Canadian literature. From the immigrant’s view of sports as a way into success within a new culture, in Clark Blaise’s “The Sociology of Love,” to Jordan Wheeler’s “The Seventh Wave,” which defies expectation about Aboriginal bravery in the sport of surfing, the reader feels as if he or she has crossed the country from east-coast immigrant tensions to west-coast wrestling with the landscape. Last comment: I love the cover image of a moose on a twilit diving board, which would seem to take its point from editor Uppal’s story “Vertigo.”

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