Valery the Great
by Elaine McCluskey

Reviewed by Bob Armstrong

It may say something about Canada and Canadians that one of our canonical twentieth-century novels was called Beautiful Losers.

And perhaps, in light of the 2012 Olympics, it’s instructive that as a nation we’ve focused so much attention on a soccer team that was, arguably, cheated out of a gold medal game, and a pair of triathletes who respectively entered their race with an injury and crashed spectacularly partway through.

Nova Scotia author and former Canadian Press journalist Elaine McCluskey explores the lives of the non-medalists of the sporting world, as well as a variety of Maritimers who have failed to make the podium in regular life, in her third book and second short-story collection Valery the Great.

In 19 mostly short, short stories, McCluskey intermixes comedy, tragedy, and social criticism while introducing readers to a large cast of misfits, dreamers, and outsiders.

The world of sports is full of people who want something very badly, and by definition most of them won’t get what they want. That creates a wealth of opportunities for drama and character exploration for the relatively small number of writers who choose the sporting world as their beat.

In my review of her delightful 2009 novel Going Fast, I wrote that McCluskey writes at times like a Nova Scotian Damon Runyon, with affectionate portraits of characters from the demimonde of boxing.

That same love of a grimy recent past and its colourful vernacular is present in some of the stories in Valery the Great. Here, for example, is a line from “Bad Boys,” in which a pair of small-town old-timers talk about the television show Cops and an arrest at an unlicensed hairdressing shop: “So den the cop comes on, a big barrel-chested fourflusher, the kind dat would clip you wit’ a sallywinder” (41).

Boxing shows up in a few of the stories in Valery the Great, as does midget wrestling. Many of the other stories focus on the bizarre sides of more reputable sports, including curling and swimming.

One of the pleasures of the collection is seeing how McCluskey captures the absurdity of the sporting world, including the egotism and delusion of coaches, athletes, and parents of young athletes.

She does so with a number of hilarious and memorable images: a passive-aggressive swim coach who develops a training technique in which swimmers are duct-taped together and thrown in the pool; a small-town curler who must quit the game because his bad balance leads to too many slips on the ice, and who then decides he’ll become an apprentice to a master icemaker from Saskatchewan.

The sporting worlds she creates in the stories “The Houdini” (swimming) and “The Wishing Well” (curling) feel so real that you can almost smell the chlorine or the ice.

Throughout the stories she finds compelling images. In “The Wishing Well,” she writes of an icemaker walking backwards down the ice “waving a wand back and forth like a priest with a censer on a chain” (119).
Often there’s a black comedy in her descriptions. In the surfing story “Finbar,” we hear of a mother trying to convince her son not to head to Alberta to work in the oil patch. The mother tells her son that recently in Alberta Brad Pitt was shooting a movie, playing a character with nine fingers, and “when the producers went looking for a hand double – someone with a missing finger – they found them everywhere” (133).

Self-contained subcultures are a strength for McCluskey, as demonstrated by the title story, about a figure skater who ends up skating with bears in a Russian circus. In this story she creates a beautiful relationship between the circus animal trainer and his skating bear Valery, named for the great Soviet hockey star Kharlamov. In parallel, we learn how the narrator grew up skating pairs in a small town and how her figure-skating career came to an end before it had a chance to start.

Many of the stories in the collection focus on the have-nots of the Atlantic provinces, especially in struggling mill or port towns. The story collection’s arc leads from the quirky and Runyonesque to the more deliberately political and angry, wrapping up with a series of stories dealing directly with status and poverty. Sometimes, McCluskey’s desire to illuminate class divisions gets in the way of her acute eye for detail.

Here, for example, is a sentence from the title story describing the hometown of the narrator: “It had dentists who only did extractions and drifters who combed the streets for butts” (47).

The first part of that sentence is a beautiful and arresting image of a poor town. What more vivid symbol of class division is there than the gaping maws of poor? So a town where the dentists only do extractions can only be a place of poverty.

But in the second half of the sentence we’ve left the vivid specificity of the dentist’s chair behind and we’re greeted first with the vague designation “drifters” and the stock image of bums picking up butts from the street.

Ultimately, though, it’s the many unique characters and settings that stay with the reader and make this collection well worth reading.

Not all of McCluskey’s losers are beautiful, but there is real beauty in Valery the Great.

Bob Armstrong is the author of the novel Dadolescence and a former soccer coach and curling parent.

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