The Unsettled
by Mona Fertig
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Reviewed by Andrew Vaisius

I find it difficult to separate my appreciation for what Mona Fertig has done to promote Canadian poetry from her own poetry, and admittedly I am biased.

This new volume contains twenty shorter poems and two longish ones: “The Mackie Lake House,” a bit of a ghost story, and “This Is Paradise,” an homage to Salt Spring Island, on which she resides. Fertig brings to bear about 40 years of poetry writing to this book, and I agree with the qualities John Lent finds in her work – sensuousness, honour and a spiritual density.

I’m also drawn to the relationship she conjures between the italic and roman fonts. Sometimes they lever simple emphasis, while at other times they become poems within poems and head off in other directions. The first two lines of “Year of the Dog” look this way: “In the village the air is steely grey, stores vacant, sales down, / rents high, the whimpering has begun”; five lines later she exclaims, “chop wood, empty the honour box,” and the sixth line after that begins “sit in the driver’s seat” (41). Link the italics together and you sense a hopeful shot after a bleak beginning. Throughout the volume this interplay carries on, and it’s hard not to notice it.

“View of the New Century,” a kind of sendoff for the book, serves up startling images of tangerine-coloured snow peaks, talking crows, and a white buffalo crashing through thorn bushes. Say what you want of that, it concludes, “The Future beckons us like pioneers. // / . . . naive as the lambs” (9). I see Hope and Hell strolling hand in hand in those last two images. Fertig is grounding us with this poem. She is wise enough to say what she sees without embellishment. Nothing sounds frivolous here.

Fertig writes holistically, though the six poems in section 4 cannot be construed as cures. They warn as much as anything about complacency in a marriage. They are like taking a wide turn on a switchback road in the mountains – you’re fine unless someone’s coming in the opposite direction, and eventually someone always does. Timing becomes god: “In early spring / a rat crept into their beautiful home,” and then we run into those italics again. Less than halfway into the poem, sitting on a line by itself, is the word “omen,” and the poem ends with a segregated line: “but that wasn’t enough” (60). To fill out the block between those corner streetlights the rat is skewered with a poker, and its persistent stink washed away with “Lysol and buckets of hot water.”

In the poem “The Goddess Gives Advice to Aging Husbands” the husbands are fault-filled, troubled and running away from or to sex. Fertig doesn’t state it as baldly as I have here. Her women – goddesses – are wiser, and I-me-mine without blame. Fertig’s views of paradise are a surprise: “But the community that saved the island from Texada logging, / lost to Public Education” (73), and “the food bank grows, private schools flourish, tourists multiply” (75). It’s an exemplary poem of back and forth, up and down, ebb and flow, mirroring the Hope and Hell we saw earlier.

The poems are packed and running, more like a current than a car. ✁

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