The Dirt Chronicles
by Kristyn Dunnion

Reviewed by Bev Sandell Greenberg

This edgy debut collection of thirteen linked stories centres on a loosely knit group of gay teenagers squatting in an abandoned factory in Toronto. The group includes a runaway, a cocaine addict, a First Nations orphan, a transgendered hooker, and a university student whose parents think he is living in residence. Reinventing themselves with names like Ferret, Cricket, and Digit, the squatters consider themselves to be rebels battling against the status quo.

Based in Toronto, Dunnion is the author of three young adult novels that portray teens as outsiders. Her 2004 novel Mosh Pit involves punk girls in a large urban setting. Published in 2008, Dunnion's most recent novel is Big, Big Sky, a futuristic tale about adolescent female orphans recruited for military training.

The Dirt Chronicles once again focuses on young people who don't fit in. In the first half of the collection, Dunnion resists the urge to link the stories in any way. Included among them are tales of an alcoholic businessman attracted to a migrant worker, a socially inept office employee with a crush on an immigrant bicycle courier, and a transgendered hooker befriended by a drug addict.

In the seventh story, “Happy House,” a squatter named Oreo plans a birthday party for her lesbian lover, Ferret, and many of the characters from the earlier stories receive invitations. From that point on, readers start to connect the dots between the plots and the characters.

In “Pig House Party,” one of the squatters posts the invitation on Facebook, so hordes of strangers crash the party, resulting in chaos and violence. The police then arrest several people and close up the factory. Dire consequences follow; the squatters are once again homeless.

The remaining four stories recount the turmoil of the aftermath and the unwelcome intervention of “the King,” an unscrupulous police chief.

Throughout the collection, Dunnion's gritty, visceral prose immediately draws readers in. This is no mean feat as the stories focus on vulnerable and marginalized characters. Yet Dunnion infuses their lives with meaning, enabling readers to view them in a positive light.

In contrast, the police officers' behaviour is nothing short of despicable, albeit somewhat exaggerated. Accordingly, some of the stories focus on bullying incidents involving the King and his associates before and after the staging of the squatters’ party.

In “Happy House,” Dunnion pulls no punches in depicting the attitudes of the squatters towards the space they claim as their own.

Home is the Factory squat ... The Factory is not an address you can write on social worker forms. Can’t get your welfare delivered here. It’s totally under the radar, a boarded-up chair factory in the Junction ... Obviously, it’s way better than living on the street, getting beat on and hassled and eating rape for breakfast ... Going hungry and losing your mind, friends turning on you. Always on the make. (86–7)
Dunnion also excels at authenticating the voices of the characters. In “Migrant,” the protagonist looks back on the consequences of his actions in helping a foreign migrant worker stay in Canada.

You can blame me for coming up with the plan. But it wasn’t so much forcible confinement or abduction like the papers said. Hell, I rescued this kid from a life of hard labour and petty disappointment. He was born in the wrong place at the wrong time and, frankly, I consider it an act of man-love solidarity, like assisted suicide. (9)

Kristyn Dunnion’s skill as a storyteller and her empathy for the underdog are well evidenced in this collection. No doubt, many readers will look forward to her next work of fiction.

Bev Sandell Greenberg is a Winnipeg writer and editor.

Buy The Dirt Chronicles at McNally Robinson Booksellers (click on the line below):
http://www.mcnallyrobinson.com/9781551524269/kristyn-dunnion/dirt-chronicles?blnBKM=1