Five Little Bitches
by Teresa McWhirter

Reviewed by Dave Williamson

One glance at this book and you know: It ain’t Anne Tyler.

Five Little Bitches, the audacious new novel by Vancouver’s Teresa McWhirter, takes us into the realm of punk rock music, chronicling the formation and rocky rise of an all-girl band called Wet Leather.

We first meet the four young women – Maxine, Squeaky, Kitty and Fanta – in their daily lives. The novel begins at a party Maxine is attending, one where everyone’s mind seems to be on getting drunk and getting laid, not necessarily in that order.

Most of the dialogue is wiser-ass banter, as in Kitty’s comment, “Sex with Jasper was boring. Getting my period was more exciting, on days with heavy flow” (35).

One of author McWhirter’s great strengths is developing character. Maxine, whose natural good looks are fading as she approaches age forty, craves the spotlight and wants desperately to be a frontwoman or lead singer of a band – she was once with one called Death by Rollercoaster. She picks up men and discards them like so much driftwood. She has wild mood swings but her stage presence can be electrifying.

The diminutive Squeaky is a talented drummer who is also a good cook. She tends to favour building a relationship with one guy and, once Wet Leather starts opening for Fire Chicken, she develops a crush on their guitarist Franky Sparrow.

Kitty plays a mean bass but she’s usually either drunk or stoned – or puking her guts out. The others worry about her much of the time; she’s just that close to becoming an addict.

Then there is Fanta on guitar. She is the steady one, the thoughtful one, dedicated to the memory of the guy who taught her how to play. By day she works with Maxine at a store called Freudian Slips.

The fifth woman referred to in the title is the beautiful Rosie, who has put her wild days behind her but is willing to provide Wet Leather with a place to practise as they wait for a break.

Franky is one of the first to recognize how good they have become when he hears them “play a unique, stripped down meat-and-potatoes rock, with killer hooks and catchy melodies” (125). They gradually perfect songs like “Whatever, Trevor” and “Bitches Don’t Do Dishes.”

At mid-novel, the girls get their first tour, with Fire Chicken, and it takes them across Canada. McWhirter has a knack for summing up their every stop without becoming repetitious; you feel you are right there with them – their cluttered van, their crowded and tawdry living quarters, the noisy and sometimes nasty audiences. Winnipeg readers will smile at this: “The Royal Albert has long been a punk landmark, a transient hotel in the middle of Winnipeg, an inhospitable city where the elements conspire to make the people as tough and unyielding as the land” (154). Yet once the band gets going, “With each song the noise thunders louder. The Winnipeg crowd knows how to have a good time” (155).

Sometimes the fun lies in the way the girls relate to their admirers, as in Sherbrooke, Quebec: “Maxine is still chatting up her two cute fans, debating whether to invite them back to the van. She wants head, but they’re so baby-faced she’ll probably give them a CD instead” (163).
Then there are the perfectly captured moments, like this one in their final stop, Halifax:

Backstage they can hear the demands of the rowdy crowd, but it’s anticlimactic. The last thing they feel like doing is performing. There’s no sense of anticipation or giddiness. Everyone knows what they’re doing tomorrow: driving back home to normal life and work. It’s like the end of camp. The camaraderie of strangers forced to party together every night is a bond formed only under rare and specific conditions such as these.

Squeaky drums on the back of a chair to warm up. Maxine and Kitty chug their drinks. Fanta rubs her knuckles, cracks her wrist. It’s time to go on. (175)

There are no dull moments, given the diversity of the four personalities. And while their rise in popularity is by no means meteoric, Wet Leather does reach a high point in New York City and eventually even tours Europe. But we know this can’t go on forever.

Five Little Bitches is funny, outrageous and startlingly authentic. For some, it will read like dispatches from a foreign world, but you feel that Teresa McWhirter knows what she is talking about, and she delivers what any reader wants – a novel that is vibrantly alive, never dull.

Not only that, every page of the book is enhanced by Derek von Essen’s distinctive designs. ♦

Dave Williamson is a Winnipeg writer whose latest book is the comic novel Dating.

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