

The World Is Moving Around Me: A Memoir of the Haiti Earthquake

by Dany Laferrière

Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2013, ISBN 9781551524986, 192 pp., \$15.95 paper.

Every Wolf's Howl

by Barry Grills

Calgary: Broadview Press, 2012, ISBN 9781554811052, 224 pp., \$21.95 paper.

Reviewed by Quentin Mills-Fenn

The earthquake, magnitude 7.1, that struck Haiti just over three years ago, on January 12, 2010, left almost indescribable despair and destruction. As many as 300,000 people died and another million were left homeless. Large sections of Port-au-Prince, the Haitian capital, were left in ruins (the Presidential palace, city slums), as were towns and villages in the countryside.

Haitian-born Montreal writer Dany Laferrière was in Haiti that January, and experienced the earthquake and its aftermath first-hand. He writes about those first days, and the days after, in *The World Is Moving Around Me*. It is, he notes, “a book that could be written only in a state of emergency” (183).

The book opens as the author had just ordered dinner in a restaurant in Port-au-Prince. A few minutes before 5:00 pm, he and his companions heard a terrible noise, and had seconds to decide what to do. Wisely, they fled the restaurant and threw themselves flat on the ground. Many others, he writes, were not so fortunate.

Laferrière travels with a notebook, and for the days after the earthquake, visiting family members and friends, he recorded his impressions. Eventually, his notes became this book, a collection of vignettes written with a revealing directness, even a coolness. But that seeming coolness is an appropriate reaction to the shocking scenes he witnesses:

An enormous number of people were caught in the monstrous traffic jams that paralyze Port-au-Prince during rush hour. The uproar suddenly stopped at 4:53 in the afternoon. The fateful hour that cut Haitian time in two. We gaze at Port-au-Prince with the stunned air of a child whose toy has just been accidentally stepped on by an adult. (24)

The author is a master of perfectly observed details. Port-au-Prince, he writes in one brief section, is more and more a city of concrete, not of wood or sheet-metal. This evolution proved fatal to countless people, since concrete structures, less flexible than the older building materials, are more likely to collapse under the pressure of a strong earthquake.

The first night, Laferrière walked through a garden, amazed to see fragile flowers still hanging from their stems. “The earthquake attacked what was hard, solid, what could resist it. The concrete fell. The flowers survived.” (22)

It's not a long book but it's the right length, written originally in French and now appearing in eloquent English thanks to Laferrière's frequent translator, David Homel. Eventually, two themes emerge. First is the need Laferrière felt to write this book. He owed his publisher a book, just not this book: “He knows I'm unpredictable but reliable.” (182)

He also writes about the spirit and perseverance of the Haitian people. Haiti, Laferrière reminds us, has a long, independent history. It declared itself independent from France in 1804, decades before the United Kingdom allowed Canada the same privilege. That same year, the new country abolished slavery, five years before the birth of Abraham Lincoln.

The two themes combine as Laferrière relates a conversation he had with his nephew who lives in Haiti. The young man, an aspiring writer, asks his uncle not to write a novel about the earthquake. It is, he explains, a young person's story, and belongs to the young generation. "Mine was the dictatorship. His is the earthquake. And his sensitivity will speak of it" (50), Laferrière writes.

Laferrière notes that such a grandiose novel isn't up his alley. It would require a new Tolstoy. "But what if this young man has what it takes?" (51)

Whereas Laferrière provides a personal take on a planetary event, Barry Grills tells an intimate story. Yet, *Every Wolf's Howl*, his memoir of a time when he lost everything but gained an unlikely friend, is told against a backdrop of big issues: keeping one's pride in the face of poverty, creating a way to live in civilized society, and what can be learned from expected sources.

In 1992, Barry Grills was the publisher of a newspaper and working himself to death. He lost the paper and had a heart attack. He also adopted a dog, a wolf-German shepherd cross. He names his new animal ("pet" hardly seems the appropriate word for such an independent creature) Lupus. For three years, the two of them, Barry and Lupus, live together, crisscross the country, and keep each other alive.

The book opens with two photographs of Lupus – a fine-looking animal indeed – and then the memoir proceeds in reverse chronological order. Bravely, smartly, Grills starts his story with the last day he had Lupus, who died suddenly, in the prime of life. It's an emotional scene, and might be hard for dog-lovers, or even the merely sensitive in general, not to tear up. In just a few pages, Grills skillfully establishes the strength of the man-wolf/dog relationship and the affection the two had for each other. Lupus, the reader quickly learns, was one impressive animal.

Also, animal-based stories, from *Old Yeller* to *Marley & Me*, frequently end with the animal's death. It's a surefire way to guarantee an emotional response to a story. Grills gets the death out of the way early so the reader can learn about the relationship between author and animal, and not dread the tear-laden last goodbye.

It's a risky decision to present the memoir this way, because some readers might prefer the security of a straightforward, start-to-finish chronology. It's the right decision, though, because the unconventional structure unsettles the reader. The book captures the unease and confusion the author felt through those difficult years, when the only real constant was the relationship he had with Lupus.

Fiercely independent, thanks to the wolf in him, Lupus is also affectionate, in his fashion. Grills learns not to try to change Lupus, but accepts him. There's a great scene where an impatient Lupus, left alone in the author's car a little too long, tears apart the interior. Well, decides Grills after surveying the damage, it's only a car.

Lupus never allows himself to be completely domesticated. Instead, he adjusts to his changing situations, accommodating and incorporating the different aspects of his nature. As Grills says to a friend, "Lupus likes to figure things out for himself" (104). That's the lesson the author takes from his years with his wolf/dog in this surprising, poignant, affectionate, and amusing memoir. 🐺

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