

Ku Klux Kanada

LIVES

Whole and Otherwise

H. Nigel Thomas

TSAR Publications

\$20.95, paper, 160pp

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As Canadians, we pride ourselves on our national image as protectors of multiculturalism; H. Nigel Thomas's new short story collection *Lives: Whole and Otherwise* offers a bleaker picture of our supposedly progressive nation. Thomas presents poignant, blunt, and hauntingly heartbreaking accounts of members of the Caribbean community in Montreal, many of whom struggle with the physically and emotionally frigid conditions of their new home.

Thomas delves deeply into the underreported lives and diverse perspectives of those who face leaving a physically and emotionally abusive partner; the impoverished reality of dedicating their lives to activist causes; and the racist biases that are subtle enough to fly under the radar of government-imposed diversity mandates, but that still continue to oppress and hinder people of colour. As a result, Canada – specifically, Montreal – reveals itself as a cruel place where women of colour are

fired upon suspicion, not proof, of theft and where a white depanneur owner can get away with shooting a black man. The unfair racial bias is chillingly expressed in “My People! My People!,” framed in a newspaper article that uses a matter-of-fact tone:

“A poll conducted today in the Montreal region shows that the overwhelming majority of Montrealers support the jury’s decision to acquit depanneur owner Felix Lukelsky of any wrongdoing in his alleged crippling of Jonathan Com-misong when the latter allegedly stole a litre of milk from his store.”

With frequent use of present tense and the matter-of-fact description of everyday prejudices, Thomas’s prose asserts that inequality and oppression are not things of the past.

But perhaps the most devastating issue Thomas depicts is the internal rift of the community, and the unwillingness of those within the community to help others – whether it’s Percy, who succumbs to insanity because his religious sister will not accept his homosexuality (“Percy’s Illness”) or black community organizations that devolve

into self-serving means to a capitalistic end (“My People! My People!”). Domestic abuse also makes a frequent appearance, creating an uncertain future for women who often appear helpless, yet unwilling to leave their violent present. Many anti-racist discourses tend to gloss over the internal class differences or sexism within a community, but Thomas does not shy away from them here.

The uncertainties of relocation and migration are structurally reflected in the stories with frequent flashbacks that disorient the reader spatially and temporally – at times, a bit too much. Many of the stories do not “begin” or “end” in a narrative sense either; instead, the stories end as the characters begin to approach a resolution or as an existing conflict takes a new turn.

While many of the stories depict the negative realities of living as a racial and ethnic other, some do offer hope for a better future. There’s the story of Mary Fellows, a sex worker of colour who organizes a political rally on St. Catherine Street (“Memoirs”) to

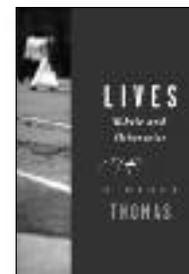
demand better working conditions for sex workers, and who uses the political and religious connections of her clientele to make a real impact. By ending the collection with “Spiders,” a story about an energized though at times hostile discussion about religion and the Bible in a Grade 8 classroom, Thomas seems to offer a glimpse of

hope that the next generation may be ready to treat diversity in a more progressive manner than the past ones.

In the same year the collection was published, an interracial couple in Nova Scotia became vic-

tims of a racially motivated hate crime as they woke up to a cross burning in their front yard. Thomas’s collection is a sombre reminder of the long way Canadians have to go in creating the multicultural paradise that Canada often represents to outsiders. **mb**

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Post-Adolescent Purgatory

BATS OR SWALLOWS

Teri Vlassopoulos

Invisible Publishing

\$16.95, paper, 144pp

ISBN 9781926743073

The characters in Teri Vlassopoulos’s debut short story collection, *Bats or Swallows*, are trying to make sense of themselves and the world. Many are in that purgatory between adolescence and adulthood, when the security of childhood erodes and the ugly complexities of the self and human experience are revealed. Using signs, symbols, and other tools of the occult – a secret handshake, a palm reading, psychic powers – they seek meaningful human connections and the comfort in knowing there is a higher power governing their fates.

In “Swimming Lessons,” a young woman struggles to come to terms with the drowning death of her father when she was a little girl. Moving from Toronto to Montreal for school, she meets a young man whose little sister died when he was sixteen. She falls in love with their shared tragedy, looking for solace in her infatuation with him. Vlassopoulos’s voice carries a sweet, palpable honesty, peppering the story with lines that tickle the heart. “His hair in my hand curled just like a Fibonacci spiral,” the main character observes, “the kind of perfection you only find in nature.”

Fun facts about mathematics, science, the black arts, and secret societies are woven into every story, adding a richness and depth to the characters, a smooth and controlled pacing, and a distinct originality to the storytelling. In “The Occult,” a young woman’s failed relationship is told in the form of six numbered vignettes under the headings Palm Reading, Astrology, Extra-Sensory Perception, Exorcism, Prophecies, and Signs. Each vignette is a small piece of the puzzle, revealing the innocent beginning and devastating end of a summer fling. In “Baby Teeth,” a woman abandoned by her mother in the woods as a child overcomes her trauma by embracing the rumours that she was raised by wolves. “A Secret Handshake” depicts a younger sister trying to bond with an increasingly distant adolescent brother by creating a secret handshake modelled after those of the Freemasons.

It is this whimsical and charmingly naïve tone that makes these stories easy to read and their moments of depth sometimes surprising. Vlassopoulos began as a writer by creating zines, those photocopied quasi-diaries defined by their heart-on-sleeve quality. While this influence has infused her writing with a delicate simplicity, she sometimes gives in to the urge to tell rather than show, wrapping up her



character’s feelings or thoughts too neatly or dissecting metaphors until there’s no meat left. The voice is a young one and, although strong, it tends to make the few adult characters seem like caricatures.

But the strength of this debut collection far outshines its small imperfections. Stories like “Art History,”

“What You Want and What You Need,” and “Bats or Swallows” are carefully crafted portraits of life with endearing characters the reader can stand behind. A work of literary fiction, this collection would also resonate with teens and young adults, who might see parallels between themselves and the young protagonists. Vlassopoulos has found a way to carry over the wide-eyed curiosity and innate goodness of childhood into the mysterious, often sad, often tragic world of adulthood. The confidence in the voice, the originality of style and the aching beautiful images are evidence of greatness to come from this engaging young writer. **mb**

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