

happens next. Its cumulative power asserts itself only later, in aftershocks. — *Joy Parks, a reviewer in Ottawa.*

Keeping Things Whole

Darryl Whetter; \$19.95 paper 978-1-77108-030-9, 304 pp., 5½ x 8½, Nimbus Publishing, Sept. Reviewed from advance reading copy

The author of a very fine story collection, an accomplished first novel, and a well-received collection of poetry, Darryl Whetter offers a second novel conceived as a breathless blog by a mid-life dad addressed to a teenage daughter he has never met.

Our protagonist, Antony, comes from a long line of Canadian bootleggers: “Mine wasn’t the only great-grandmother to cross on the ferry with bottles under her skirts.” When teenage Antony meets Kate, his daughter’s future mom, he’s using a homemade catapult to hurl bundles of weed across the river from Windsor to Detroit. Despite the family pedigree, his “yoga-crazy drama teacher” mom puts her foot down on the matter of drug running and kicks him out of the house at age 19. We follow the stumbling progress of Antony and Kate’s relationship, his fractious history with his mother, and his issues stemming from the early disappearance of his father.

The novel is aptly bloggish, with chronology and content having a random feel. An elegiac evocation of Detroit’s urban decay dominates a chapter describing an excursion with Kate, to the extent that the city feels more dimensional than the girlfriend. We’ve learned that she’s a lawyer, and athletic sex indicates at least one level of compatibility, but it’s not until 90 pages in that she is glimpsed in full personhood, livid that Antony has lied about his drug smuggling and that he risks going to jail.

Many of Whetter’s detours are questionable. A history of American cannabis cultivation stalls the narrative and ends with a declaration that feels overly authorial: “Every dollar we spend on prisons and workplace drug testing is waste, precious waste.” Mini-histories of the Windsor area fill space that might have been used for character and story development. One chapter visits Antony’s granddad in the trenches of the Great War; a long paragraph offers a spritely history of condoms; and so on.

Much of this could have been impressive in a more carefully constructed book, but there remain flashes of throwaway eloquence. — *Jim Bartley, a playwright and novelist in Toronto.*

SHORT FICTION

★ *Savage Love*

Douglas Glover; \$29.95 cloth 978-0-86492-901-3, 264 pp., 5½ x 8½, Goose Lane Editions, Sept. Reviewed from advance reading copy

There are familiar reasons why more people don’t recognize Douglas Glover as one of Canada’s best writers – chief among them the fact that he mainly writes experimental short fiction published by small presses. One hopes these prejudices won’t dog his latest collection. *Savage Love* is an accomplished, funny, and inventive book that readers should rejoice in.

The theme, announced in the title, is indeed a savage, perverse kind of desire – reminiscent, at times, of Barbara Gowdy’s *We So Seldom Look on Love*. One of Glover’s narrators describes a particularly torrid affair as being such a compulsive “wallow of resentment, hatred, lust, rage and envy ... that to this day I think all of those emotions are love.” In another story we hear of the terror and “inhuman endlessness of desire, our inability to contain it, the dark tide on which we ride unwitting and unprepared.” Love as we find it here is ruinous, bestial, and passionate, with “passion” involving not just emotional peaks but also the depths of spiritual suffering.

An emphasis on rutting and physicality nicely complements Glover’s display of technical proficiency and formal experimentation. A favourite word is “ineffable,” but his writing embodies a different spirit, full of cerebral grip and grit. Glover is a smart writer of precisely measured effects, but it never seems like he’s showing off.

He’s also a master of shifting between moods and modes (he calls some of the stories “fugues”), and the collection moves fluidly from a brilliant parody of Cormac McCarthy’s demonic early style in the opening story, “Tristiana” (which shows how gentle a nudge is required to tip some texts into the absurd), to the psychosexual terror of “Crown of Thorns.”

Then there are the spare microfictions of the book’s Intermezzo section and the bawdy humour of the concluding comedies. Through it all, the timing (so essential to comic writing), point of view, and diversity of language is near perfect. Only one story, “A Flame, a Burst of Light,” seems out of place, but it’s still a good read on its own merits. By any measure, *Savage Love* deserves to be recognized as one of the best Canadian books

published this year. — *Alex Good, editor of Canadian Notes & Queries.*

Red Girl Rat Boy

Cynthia Flood; \$19.95 paper 978-1-92742-841-2, 192 pp., 5½ x 8½, Biblioasis, Sept. Reviewed from advance reading copy

Journey Prize-winning short-story writer Cynthia Flood has a new collection, her fourth, and it showcases her narrative sensitivity, historical range, and courage in using foul language.

This relatively slim collection of 11 stories features a large wildcat, domestic troubles, and memories of the West Coast’s extreme left in the 1960s and ’70s. “Blue Clouds” and “Dirty Work,” for example, recount class struggle and the sex lives of “contacts” and “comrades,” but they are more anthropologically interesting than examples of stunning short-story technique.

Flood shows significantly more range in stories like “Addresses,” “One Two Three Two One,” and the title story, which engage the author’s playful and tender sides. In “Red Girl Rat Boy,” for example, a school-age girl is obsessed with red hair. She clips photographs from magazines and covets the hair of the girl who sits in front of her in class. This obsession is arbitrary and also believable; such are the ridiculous predicaments that people get themselves caught up in. It ends badly, of course. So does the marriage in “Addresses” and the motherhood in “One Two Three Two One.”

But the gold here is not in the endings, which is counter-intuitive for a genre in which they are normally considered key. Flood spreads out her narrative nodes (as Douglas Glover would say) evenly. The story “Such Language” begins: “Fuck you, the message tape said one day.” The poor wife and mother at the story’s centre is distressed. Yet the story is told retrospectively: the first-person narrator is already beyond it all. Flood presents the crisis as both fully present and miles away. We get reflections on the ancient nature of tape-message technology and hyper-anxiety about the source of the message’s aggression. The result is that we don’t anticipate the conclusion so much as pay attention to the journey.

As we have come to expect, Flood’s stories reward attentive reading. Realism is the dominant technique, but there are also quirks that bend the reader’s ear and excite. Carol Shields used to talk about female storytelling that avoided the “classic” duality of climax