

Quill & Quire

DECEMBER 2019



Books of the Year

Our editors pick their top reads
of 2019 PAGE 15

Meet the breakout stars

Stunning debuts by Zaliqa Reid-Benta,
Téa Mtonji, and Rebecca Fisseha

PAGE 12

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Books of the Year

Q&Q editors reveal some of their top picks for 2019

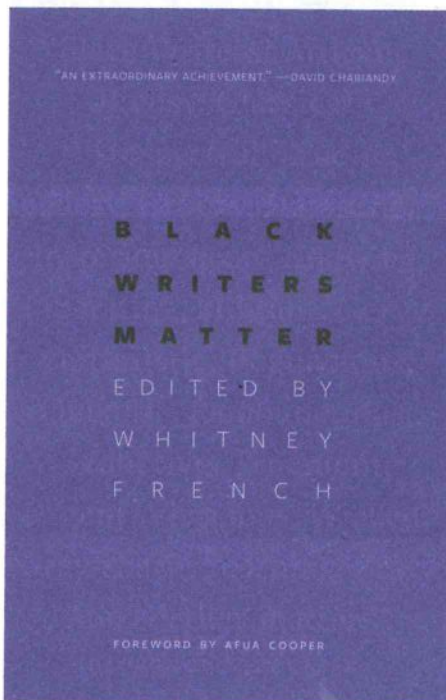
BY STEVEN W. BEATTIE, SUE CARTER, AND RYAN PORTER

Black Writers Matter

Whitney French, ed.

University of Regina Press

Calls for diversity in Canadian literature are ongoing and urgent; credit editor Whitney French with providing a blueprint for how such initiatives might appear in practice. Stylistically heterogeneous – ranging from memoir to creative non-fiction to essays – the 23 pieces in *Black Writers Matter* provide a cross-section of approaches to inclusion from voices both established and emerging. H. Nigel Thomas offers a spirited defence of fiction as a serious mechanism for truth telling. Rowan McCandless wrestles with the subjects of eating disorders and body image by way of a mock multiple-choice quiz. And French herself provides the transcript of an interview with a former cab driver in B.C. Existing at the intersection of race, gender, class, and nationality, this invaluable collection offers a window on the present and a series of clarion calls for how to move forward into the future. –SWB



Sonnet's Shakespeare

Sonnet L'Abbé

McClelland & Stewart

The most audacious volume of poetry to appear in 2019 is a work of erasure, but not just any erasure. Fearless stylist Sonnet L'Abbé takes on the work of a figure no less towering than the Bard himself, in the process questioning notions of literary fame and canon building. In 154 prose poems, L'Abbé overwrites each of Shakespeare's sonnets, submerging the originals in meditations on Indigenous justice, sexual assault,



climate change, David Bowie, and Prince. Conceptually bold, linguistically inventive, and thematically weighty, *Sonnet's Shakespeare* invites its readers to ask themselves who decides which figures appear at the centre of poetic tradition and which are consigned to the margin, and to struggle with what erasure ultimately means. –SWB



Watching You Without Me

Lynn Coady

House of Anansi Press

If it weren't for the warnings dropped throughout Lynn Coady's story of how a woman, her developmentally disabled sister, and a caretaker's lives intertwine ("the details that come later," she teases, "the juicy stuff that makes people cringe and cover their eyes"), you could be lulled into believing Coady was spinning an opposites-attract character drama. But the suspense that thumps beneath the surface ultimately grows too loud to ignore in this story of psychological manipulation and intimidation. –RP

The Blue Road: A Fable of Immigration

Wayde Compton and April dela Noche Milne, ill.

Arsenal Pulp Press

The prose harvested from Wayde Compton's 1999 short story for this graphic-novel adaptation only emphasizes the creativity of the plot in his heroine's journey to the Northern Kingdom, a pointed immigration allegory. But it's April dela Noche Milne's vibrant illustrations – pools of saturated colours that contrast with squiggles of energetic line work – that give the story new life. –RP



We Have Always Been Here: A Queer Muslim Memoir

Samra Habib

Penguin Canada

As publishing reconsiders its expectations around authors' emotional labour, Samra Habib discloses her own story – immigrating from Pakistan to Canada, entering an arranged marriage as a teenager, then finding, and thriving, in her queer Muslim identity – on her own terms. Through level and confident storytelling, Habib renders her extraordinary circumstances universal. –RP

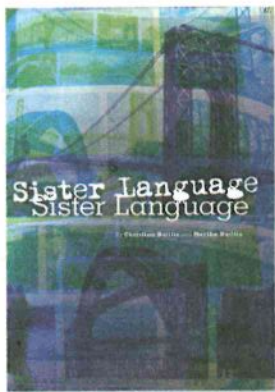


Sister Language

Christina Baillie and Martha Baillie

Pedlar Press

"Martha, Martha, do you? See?" The final, plaintive query from schizophrenic writer Christina Baillie is a fitting capstone to this unique double



memoir. Combining correspondence between Christina and her sister, novelist Martha Baillie, along with short fiction, poetry, and visual art, *Sister Language* excavates the "cognitive disorganization" and "formal thought disorder" of Christina's neurological condition, while also offering a joyful and optimistic tribute to the possibilities of language as a bridge to understanding and acceptance. This is a courageous and stylistically adventurous encounter with the various ways individuals engage with and try to make sense of themselves and the world. –SWB

Empire of Wild

Cherie Dimaline

Random House Canada

To those captivated by Dimaline's unchained imagination in the YA novel *The Marrow Thieves*: wait until you see what she does after the kids are in bed. The sexy, spooky *Empire of Wild* casts the Métis tales of the Rogarou – a manlike



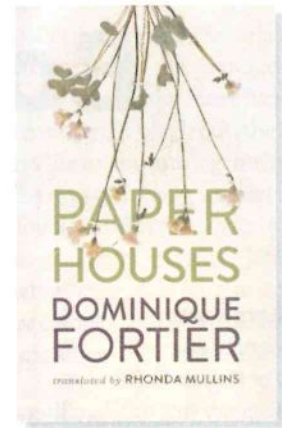
wolf – against the backdrop of the ongoing colonization of Indigenous people by religious and corporate interests. The result is a page-turner of a supernatural thriller that imbues ancient lore with contemporary relevance. –RP

Paper Houses

Dominique Fortier and Rhonda Mullins, trans.

Coach House Books

In a year dominated by big books and heavy subjects, reading *Paper Houses* feels like a delight-



ful fresh breeze. Haunted by a vision of Emily Dickinson, Dominique Fortier reimagines the 19th-century poet's formative years, growing from a strong-minded teen into an artist so engrossed in language she shuts herself off from the world. Presented as a series of poetic vignettes, this slim, quiet work resonates with its stunning imagery and its thoughtful investigation into the artistic mind. –SC

Reproduction

Ian Williams

Random House Canada

Virtuosic B.C. writer Ian Williams extends the linguistic playfulness and stylistic legerdemain from his poetry and short fiction in a debut novel that explodes the very notion of the conventional multigenerational family saga. Combining Joycean wordplay, formal innovation, and stylistic pyrotechnics, and mixing in pop cultural references that run the gamut from *The Maury Povich Show* to *The Silence of the Lambs*, Williams enthusiastically deconstructs a series of interconnected stories that find their genesis

Bunny

Mona Awad

Hamish Hamilton Canada

What one would give to have been nestled inside Mona Awad's warren of a mind as she was writing scenes featuring some of the most subversive antagonists to appear in CanLit this year. On the exterior, the Bunnies – as this clique of MFA students collectively refers to themselves – seem all cotton-candy sweet in their cutesy vintage dresses and matching cardigans. But literal monsters lurk behind their hyper-feminine facades and within this wickedly satirical novel. Gory, hilarious, and astute in its observations of creative-writing culture, Awad ensures you'll never think about "Workshop" the same way again. –SC



Surrender: The Call of the American West

Joanna Pocock

House of Anansi Press

The arbitrary political boundaries of right and left dissolve in Pocock's memoir of her time exploring the subcultures of the American West. Rewilders who commit environmental anarchy by sewing seeds through the wilderness, Three Percenters who champion the U.S. Constitution while defying multinational corporations, and eco-sexuals who practise polyamory and cherish the Earth like a lover represent meeting places between the radical environmentalism of the far left and the self-determination of the far right. —RP



in a hospital room where two strangers meet while their respective mothers lie dying. What sounds lugubrious actually proves to be one of



the most energetic, lively, funny, and sad novels of the year. —SWB

The Testaments

Margaret Atwood

McClelland & Stewart

Thirty-four years after the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale* – and years after the feature film, opera, and wildly successful Hulu television series it spawned – Margaret Atwood made a splash with a sequel, one of the indisputable publishing behemoths of 2019. In addition to selling more print copies in its first week in Canada than any other book since BookNet Canada tracking began and moving more than



100,000 copies in its first week in the U.K., the novel shared this year's Booker Prize and garnered mostly glowing reviews for its story about collaboration, survival, and rebellion under totalitarianism. —SWB

A Mind Spread Out on the Ground

Alicia Elliott

Doubleday Canada

Alicia Elliott is at the forefront of a young generation of Indigenous writers illuminating the failures of Canada's call for reconciliation. The Tuscarora author's debut essay collection crackles with intellectual wit and emotion. She melds the personal with the political, connecting experiences from her own life to pervading



Alicia Elliott ▲

Yours, for Probably Always: Martha Gellhorn's Letters of Love & War

Janet Somerville, ed.

Firefly Books

Janet Somerville is a dutiful pen pal who has handwritten a letter every day since January 2014. It's no surprise that she felt a kinship to Martha Gellhorn, who left behind a fascinating archive of correspondences to and by the likes of Eleanor Roosevelt, Lauren Bacall, Leonard Bernstein, and H.G. Wells. Gellhorn was a glamorous novelist, social-justice activist, and fearless war correspondent who covered almost every major conflict of the 20th century. Yet she is most often treated as a historical footnote because of her short-lived marriage to Ernest Hemingway. Thanks to Somerville's tireless efforts, Gellhorn may finally receive the attention she rightfully deserves. —SC



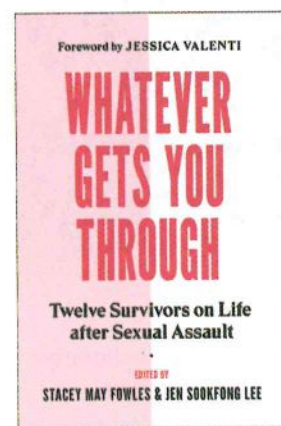
issues facing Indigenous people, including racism, colonialism, and the dismantling of trauma. Experimental in form and infused with gut-punching language, Elliott's book shares recollections of love, sorrow, anger, and joy. —SC

Whatever Gets You Through: Twelve Survivors on Life after Sexual Assault

Stacey May Fowles and Jen Sookfong Lee, ed.

Greystone Books

Despite the supportive messaging behind #MeToo, much of the dialogue around sexual assault remains focused on predator motivations. What has been lacking is any meaningful discussion around how survivors cope with trauma. Editors Stacey May Fowles and Jen Sookfong Lee aimed to correct this oversight by inviting



12 formidable writers – including Heather O'Neill, Kai Cheng Thom, and Elisabeth de Mariaffi – to share their personal experiences, proving there are as many roads to survival as there are stories left to tell. —SC