

Strong fortress

Laisha Rosnau's enthralling second novel focuses on a historical Italian family

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Buried secrets

Emma Donoghue returns with a novel about family relations past and present

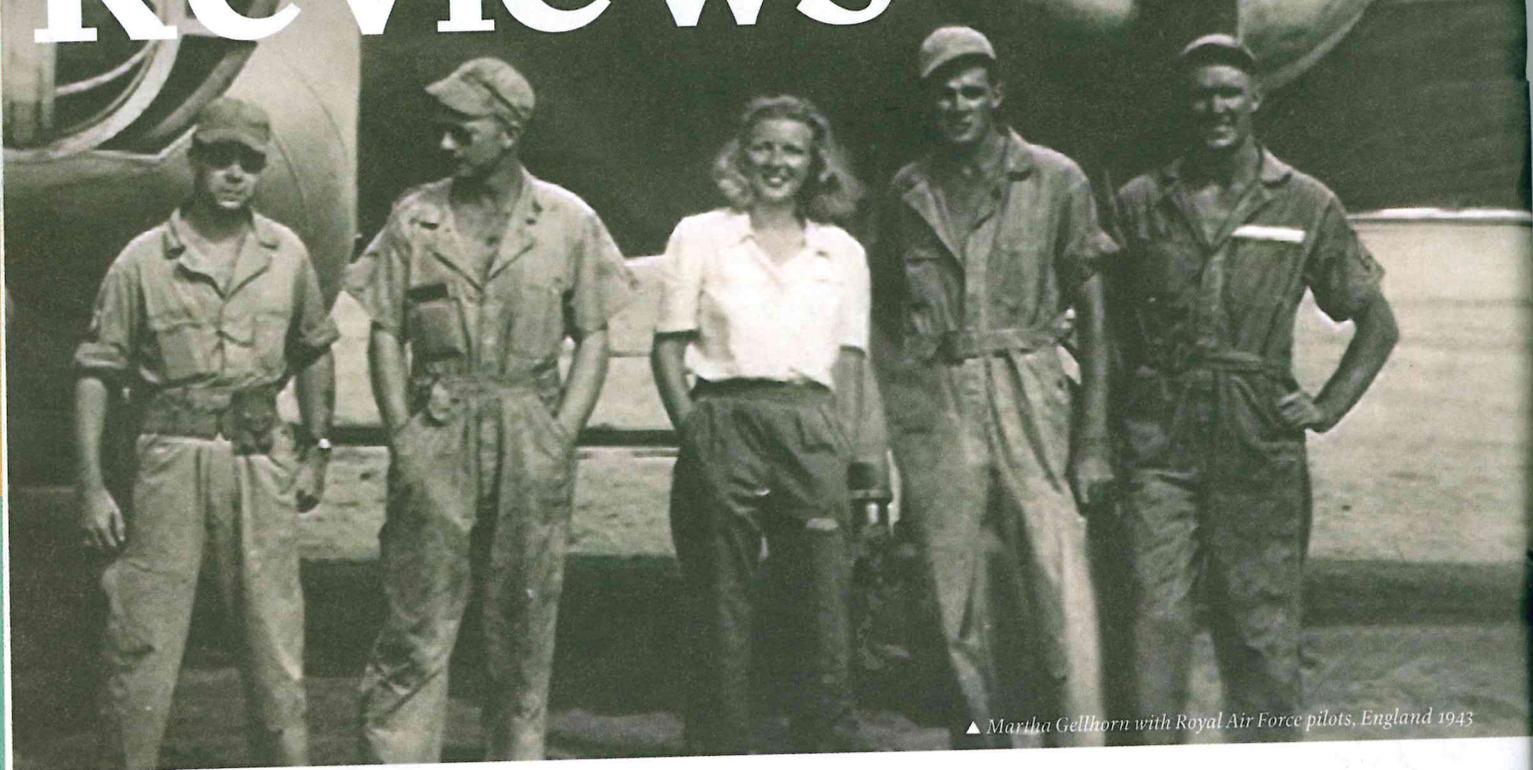
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High tension

Jessica Westhead takes a turn toward darker material in her sophomore novel

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Reviews



▲ Martha Gellhorn with Royal Air Force pilots, England 1943

BELLES LETTRES

Foreign correspondent

A major new volume of Martha Gellhorn's letters proves the journalist and fiction writer to be a major literary force in her own right

BY MEGAN MOORE BURNS

Yours, for Probably Always: Martha Gellhorn's Letters of Love and War 1930–1949

Janet Somerville, ed.
Firefly Books

MARTHA GELLHORN was born in 1908 in St. Louis, Missouri, and almost immediately was desperate to be somewhere else. She left for France in 1930 and embarked on a 60-year career as a foreign correspondent covering every major conflict around the globe, including the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, the Vietnam War, and the U.S. invasion of Panama.

When she wasn't in an active war zone, she was reporting on social issues, such as poverty, or writing fiction that reflected what she had seen and felt.

In *Yours, for Probably Always*, editor Janet Somerville has curated a collection of letters to and from Gellhorn and some very notable people, including family, friends, and lovers. Somerville includes summaries at the beginning of each chapter and occasional interjections between letters to establish the timeline of Gellhorn's life. These sections can be a bit repetitive, but they are very effective at establishing why Gellhorn was travelling and the

obstacles she faced.

In addition to her passion for reporting and writing, Gellhorn's letters lay bare her tumultuous romantic relationships. She initiated an affair with the married French intellectual Bertrand de Jouvenel in the early 1930s, and this began a pattern of dalliances with men who were utterly enraptured with her intellectual prowess even after she had moved on. The more the men in her life tried to cling to her, the more likely Gellhorn was to pull away. "A man is of no use to me, unless he can live without me," she wrote, and very few of the men in her life ended up being able to live up to that expectation.

Gellhorn's legacy has always been compromised by her marriage to Ernest Hemingway. From the beginning of their affair in 1937 to their divorce in 1945, her name was inextricably linked to him and his fame, much to her frustration. Despite the relatively short span of their relationship, the bulk of the letters

in *Yours, for Probably Always* are between Gellhorn and Hemingway, which is a bit disappointing if one of Somerville's goals was to give Gellhorn the independent recognition she deserves. That being said, in addition to being achingly beautiful, her missives to Hemingway illustrate her development as a writer.

You don't need to be familiar with Gellhorn's other writing in order to enjoy her letters; this collection simply fuels the desire to seek out and read all of her work. Her correspondents and Somerville speak so movingly about Gellhorn's reporting that the reader aches to experience these pieces first-hand, and reading how Gellhorn herself describes her fiction-writing process prompts a yearning to track down the final product.

It is difficult, after finishing *Yours, for Probably Always*, to decide whether Gellhorn is likable as a person. Her writing is so interesting that the reader is compelled to push forward, even when the content of the letters is off-putting. For example, it is jarring to read a missive that expresses sympathy for people living in poverty while also lamenting their indiscriminate breeding and inferior intelligence. While Gellhorn seems to have cared deeply about the individuals she met during her life, sometimes raging at their terrible circumstances, she does not come off as having been overly fond of people on the whole. It is also hard to reconcile the fiery, independent Gellhorn, who craved a life outside contemporary female domesticity, with the woman who wrote saccharine letters to men who treated her poorly, often praising them while putting herself down.

These mixed feelings on the part of the reader are mitigated by Gellhorn's remarkable self-awareness. She seems to have been fully cognizant of both her strengths and her flaws, and the pros and cons of her relationships. She writes clearly of her desire for freedom above all else, expressing the need for "flowers and sun and grass to roll in and air to breathe and sun and long, intensely empty days," even as this conflicted sharply with the role expected of her as a woman. She is even able to articulate to Hemingway exactly why their relationship began failing when he could not accept her career: "I have to live my way as well as yours, or there wouldn't be any me to love you with."

In the end, the reader's feelings about Gellhorn as a person simply don't matter in the face of the sheer power and beauty of her writing. She was compelled to commit words to

paper – it was her "mind's and spirit's purge" – and she recorded what she saw as the only way to feel part of bigger things: "I swallowed the world around me whole and it came out in words."

Whatever she wrote, she always wanted her writing to be of service. As we learn more about women whose achievements have frequently gone unrecognized in the shadow of the men they stood beside, it is important that Gellhorn take her place as a trailblazing journalist and author who made the world better for having written about what she saw.

NDN Coping Mechanisms: Notes from the Field

Billy-Ray Belcourt

House of Anansi Press

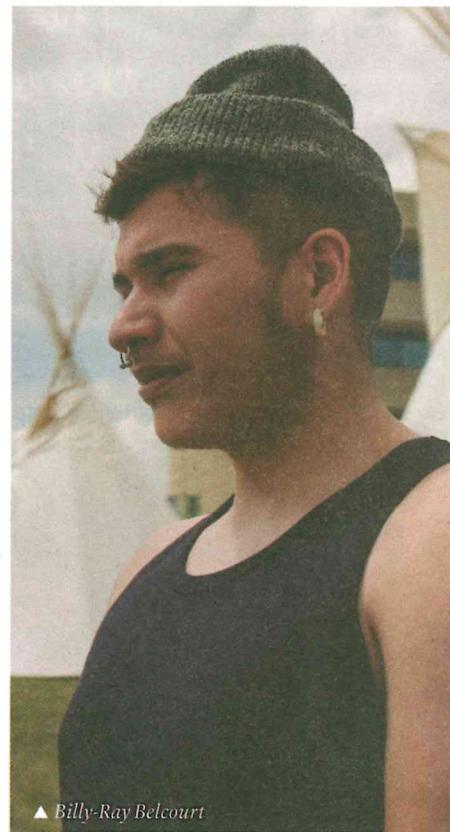
BILLY-RAY BELCOURT HAS BECOME one of Canada's poetry sweethearts since the release of his 2018 Griffin Poetry Prize winner, *This Wound Is a World*. His sophomore collection – a masterful blend of the personal and the political, the ephemeral and the corporal, the theoretical and the emotional – does not disappoint. *NDN Coping Mechanisms* is a gift with sharp edges that struggles to reconcile the difficult dichotomies that plague society in general and Indigenous communities in particular.

The poems form a complex web of meaning spun out of grief and desire. This collection is concerned with reconstituting and reconciling time, coming to terms with and speaking back to history as it moves through the present. The poems are lucidly, terribly aware of the way time operates on bodies and on the constitution of the self – and the signifiers we apply as a result.

Belcourt wrestles angrily with temporality. If history is always with us in the here and now, the poems ask, and if that history is one of wounding and catastrophe, how is it possible to imagine a future for Indigenous peoples? Belcourt doesn't attempt to approximate an answer to this question; toward the end of the book, he snidely speaks of his propensity for utopian thinking, saying, "maybe it is a coping mechanism. So what?" These poems are not interested in answering questions so much as demonstrating the insoluble nature of grand problems and trying to forge a space in which one is able to sit with that lack of certainty.

Freedom is conceptualized here as a disappearance, an existence outside time and

history – and outside identity. An existence that involves being in nothingness. The poems struggle with how dangerously appetizing such freedom is, especially when the state of being in the world for many Indigenous people is being in grief, living with pain that consumes a body. "My grief crowbarred the door open. / It is like a coffin: / inviting a gaze in response / to which it can't spit back a body," Belcourt writes in "The Wall Clock Caught Fire from Neglect." It's a fair reaction: "Nothingness is



▲ Billy-Ray Belcourt

a world unto itself. / A lot of NDNs live there. / I don't fault them. / What use is a map when the world is labyrinthine?"

Ultimately, though, an escape from temporality isn't a coping mechanism the poet endorses. These poems are crafted as rooms in the rickety house of history within which a person can wrestle the devils of suffering and grief, and through such a struggle create a self. The weight of history's violence shatters Indigenous selfhood; it's a tiring job to pick through the wreckage of what has been done to you.

And yet, such effort can represent an act of revenge against ongoing systematic injustice. As Belcourt piercingly reminds us, "Revenge is more decolonial than justice."

–Nour Abi Nakhoul