

Books editor Greg Rothwell • grothwell@therecord.com

A struggle for true identity

Kitchener author's debut novel, *Red Jacket*, clever and heart-wrenching

RED JACKET

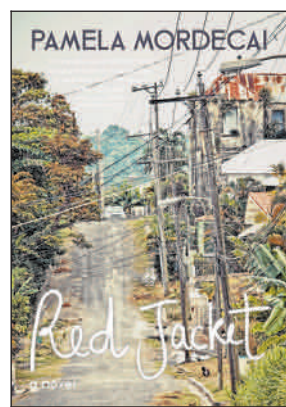
by Pamela Mordecai (TAP Books – Dundurn Press, 462 pages, \$24.99 trade paperback)

Julie Najjar

“Red Jacket,” the debut novel by Kitchener author Pamela Mordecai, follows Grace Carpenter from her childhood in rural St. Chris, a fictional Caribbean island, to her schooling in Queenstown, then to Toronto and Ann Arbor, Mich., for university and graduate studies.

And it finally follows her to Geneva where, working for the World Health Organization, she collaborates in efforts to find solutions to the AIDS crisis in Africa and the Caribbean.

Along the way, she meets a wide variety of characters, including Maisie and Stephanie, Charlie and Mark, and finally Father Atules, who works with her on her most important



eyes.

She knows she is loved and cherished, but she never really feels she belongs. When some of the neighbourhood kids taunt her and call her “a little red jacket,” she doesn’t understand what they mean, and it is not until many years later that she discovers the truth about her real parentage. She struggles throughout her life to find her true identity and to reconcile her circumstances with where she came from and who she has become.

Mordecai’s use of Creole terminology and

project.

But throughout her life, Grace is troubled by her origins. She can’t understand why all the other members of her large, extended family are black, while she is a redibo, having copper-coloured skin, red hair and grey

speech patterns enhances the reader’s experience and really creates the feeling of being on a Caribbean island.

She provides an index at the back for easy reference, and it is there that one finds the meaning of the term “red jacket.”

While the timelines and side stories in this lengthy, detailed novel are sometimes a bit muddled, it is well worth the effort to keep reading to the very end. Alternately heart-wrenching, clever and very real, this novel tackles issues that are relevant on both a personal and a global level.

Pamela Mordecai was born in Jamaica and has lived in Canada since 1993. She has published five collections of poetry and an anthology of short fiction. She has also written many textbooks and edited or co-edited anthologies of Caribbean writing.

Her poems have been shortlisted for the Canada Writes CBC Poetry Prize and the Bridport Prize in the UK. She is the recipient of the Institute of Jamaica’s Centenary and Bronze Musgrave Medals. She lives in Kitchener with her husband and three children.

Julie Najjar is a Kitchener librarian who blogs at juliesreadingcorner.com



AT THE LIBRARY



Steve Kraft is CEO of the Guelph Public Library. He recommends:

THE SWIMMER

by Joakim Zander (HarperCollins, 432 pages, \$22.99 hardcover)

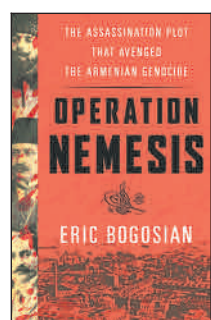
One of the *best* jobs as a librarian is discovering and then recommending an exciting new author. This is the case with Swedish author Joakim Zander and his first novel, “The Swimmer.” It’s an international thriller and the action starts in 1980 in Damascus where a car bomb explodes, killing the mother of a young baby.

Jump ahead 30 years to Sweden where the story picks up with a graduate law student named Mahmoud who receives a mysterious message, “Be careful, you’re being watched.” And of course, he is! The mystery continues in Brussels at the European Union parliament where the office of Mahmoud’s friend Klara is bugged by a shadowy American company. Pretty soon, Klara and Mahmoud are on the run from Brussels to Paris and back to Sweden with a laptop full of dangerous CIA documents.

This is a thrilling ride from beginning to end. Let’s hope Zander writes another one soon.

HISTORY

Operation Nemesis reads like film script



OPERATION NEMESIS: THE ASSASSINATION PLOT THAT AVENGED THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

by Eric Bogosian (Little, Brown and Company, 337 pages, \$31 hardcover)

Bob Gordon

Can genocide ever be avenged? Can the practitioners of genocide ever be punished in a manner where justice is done?

These are the existential questions that could have been at the heart of a fascinating program of vengeance known as Operation Nemesis.

In the wake of the Turkish decimation of the Armenian population within the Ottoman Empire 100 years ago this year during the First World War (an event memorialized every April 24), a group of assassins set out to eliminate the perpetrators and succeeded.

Dozens of those responsible — from the Grand Vizier, Talat Pasha to Armenian collaborators — were killed, and the plot remained undetected for decades. It’s a fascinating piece of history and a ripping good yarn replete with international intrigue and assassinations.

The protagonist is one Soghomon Tehlirian. With one murder already under his belt, he is chosen to kill Talat Pasha, hiding in exile in Berlin. He is then to remain with the body and surrender to police.

His trial will be used as a venue for Armenians to publicize genocide.

Remarkably, he is acquitted, based on the severe mental strain resulting from his false claim that he had seen his entire family slaughtered before his very eyes — an early example of a post-traumatic stress disorder defence. He also manages to shelter his handlers and the organization, eventually living a long and peaceful life, while other assassins continued to kill.

Unfortunately, “Operation Nemesis: The Assassination Plot that Avenged the Armenian Genocide” is a poorly told tale.

Eric Bogosian is an actor and playwright. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for his play “Talk Radio” and won a Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival for the screen version of that work.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, this book reads more like a film treatment than a work of history.

With disarming frequency, Bogosian invents dialogue with no reference to sources. More jarringly, he regularly leaps into Tehlirian’s mind and emotions, creating internal anguish from whole cloth.

The larger context, the extraordinary number assassinated and the durability, success and secrecy of the operation, fade beside Tehlirian’s star turn.

More importantly, the larger existential questions are unasked as Bogosian is tempted by the more showy qualities and neglects the virtues of simplicity, vigour and lucidity.

Bob Gordon is a Toronto writer.

FICTION

Great introduction to McGuane

CROW FAIR: STORIES

by Thomas McGuane (Knopf, 288 pages, \$30 hardcover)

Jack Pender

Thomas McGuane’s literary career has been impressively wide-ranging, encompassing everything from acclaimed comic novels to an impressive list of screenwriting credits to his more recent output of memoirs and non-fiction writing.

In “Crow Fair,” his new collection of short fiction, his varied talents are brought to bear in an impressive array of spare and memorable character studies.

McGuane’s stories, at first glance, fit in with The New Yorker/Iowa Writer’s Workshop school of realism. Stylistically, these yarns favour naturalistic description, understated dialogue, and male protagonists whose taciturnity signals a generalized, undefined malaise.

Sometimes, these character studies conclude on a mundane image, highlighting the circularity of their hero’s predicament; elsewhere, long-simmering dissatisfactions erupt into violence through unexpected channels.

It’s a testament to McGuane’s powers that, writing in such a familiar generic mode, he surpasses most of his peers in execution and sharpness of vision. His protagonists are carefully individuated, their personalities and obsessions eloquently implied by a sudden upwelling of bitterness or an unexpected surge

of sympathy. When sudden reversals render their self-involvements painfully ludicrous, the comedy is tempered by a knowing acceptance of the inexhaustible variety of human foibles.

Many of these stories follow familiar, even archetypal, patterns, inserting the reader into situations both familiar and vividly imagined.

When the protagonist in “Motherlode” is implicated in a con-man’s scheme, his curiosity leads him to self-destruction in an ironic denouement reminiscent of Flannery O’Connor. In “On a Dirt Road,” years worth of spite and resentment are nullified when a self-pitying husband accidentally stumbles on proof of his wife’s infidelity.

“The Good Samaritan” features an aging rancher powerless to stop the machinations of a smooth-talking ranch hand forced to watch his values exchanged for the empty vanities of a new generation. McGuane skilfully deflates the pretensions of his comically blind protagonists, even as he veers unexpectedly into tender moments of self-recognition.

Few writers can imbue such familiar templates with individual life. McGuane’s narrative artifice is so deft as to be almost invisible — it’s not until you finish the story that you realize how fully he has transformed a dramatic type into a believable personality.

This collection is a great introduction to McGuane, and a good pick for any fans of Raymond Carver, Tobias Wolff or T.C. Boyle.

Jack Pender is a Kitchener writer.

POLITICAL THRILLER

THE HEART OF HELL

by Alen Mattich (House of Anansi, 333 pages, \$19.95 paperback)

Eugene McCarthy

Fans of Alen Mattich’s principal character, Marko della Torre, will be glad to see the Balkans detective has returned in this third volume of the series.

Della Torre was introduced in “Zagreb Cowboy” and matured in “Killing Pilgrim.” Things haven’t gone well with him in the intervening period. He has lost his position as a secret policeman as the Yugoslavian civil war is gaining momentum in the early 1990s and one-time neighbours are killing each other with a vengeance.

He is being hounded by “the Americans,” who suspect he has been responsible — or knows who is — for the deaths of two of their countrymen. A shadowy figure named the “Montenegrin” is a likely suspect, but the key

to finding him is Julius Strumbic, a former boss of della Torre who is believed to be in Dubrovnik. He is a vital link in the mystery surrounding the assassination that was the focal point of the second novel.

What used to be a simple journey now becomes a very difficult one, with the constant fear of being shelled by Serbian forces as della Torre and an associate make their way from Zagreb.

They learn the only way to get to Dubrovnik is by sea, and a substantial part of the story is how they manage, what they find and how they resolve the situation. That’s no easy task given the worsening civil war and the dangers that grow incrementally daily.

This is high adventure at its best, and it would appear from the conclusion of the story that Mattich may have another Marko della Torre novel in the works or in mind, something that would be welcomed by his followers.

Eugene McCarthy is a Waterloo writer.

CHILDREN

We must protect the planet year-round

Brenda Hoerle

Got a child in your household who doesn’t like to keep his or her room clean?

Read them Ron Lightburn’s latest book, “Frankenstink! Garbage Gone Bad” (Tundra, \$19.99 hardcover).

Only then may these litter bugs realize the error of their untidy ways.

While a young boy sleeps at night, the mess underneath his bed — chocolate bar wrappers, greasy old chips or near-empty cans of pop — takes on a life of its own in the shape of one gooey, yucky monster. Add to the mix a boy who doesn’t like to bathe and a closed window banning fresh air, and the conditions are ripe.

“This thing comes to life and proceeds to the door, with all of its parts rising up from the floor,” the Nova Scotia author writes in rhyming text. From leftovers in the fridge to garbage cans in the street, this “ravenous wretch rolling into the night” makes its nasty way to the



garbage dump, where “greedily gorging on acres of gunk, the thing is mutating with each tasty chunk.”

While the book is aimed at a four-to-eight-year-old readership, the message here is clear.

Our actions, or lack thereof, can have nasty consequences.

Even though April 22 has already come and gone “Frankenstink!” is a perfect read to inspire future Earth Day activities. Protecting our planet and keeping it healthy takes effort year-round.

Brenda Hoerle reviews children’s books for the Waterloo Region Record and the Guelph Mercury. You can reach her at hoerlebooks@yahoo.ca

Bookmarks

► Bestselling Canadian author Andrew Pyper will be appearing at the Waterloo Public Library main library (35 Albert Street) Tuesday, April 28, from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. He will be discussing his new book, “The Damned.” A book signing will follow the discussion.

► On Saturday, May 2, Tasneem Jamal, Andrew Kolb, David Waltner-Toews and R.J. Anderson will volunteer at Words Worth Books in Waterloo as part of Authors for Indies Day.

Bestseller

Based on sales by 250 independent Canadian booksellers for the week ending Saturday, April 18. Bracketed figures indicate number of weeks on the list.

Hardcover Non-Fiction

- (7) **H is for Hawk** Helen Macdonald
- (12) **The Brain’s Way of Healing** Norman Doidge
- (6) **Dead Wake: The Last Crossing of the Lusitania** Erik Larson
- (1) **The Time of Your Life: Choosing a Vibrant, Joyful Future** Margaret Trudeau
- (6) **17 Carnations: The Royals, The Nazis and the Biggest Cover-Up in History** Andrew Morton
- (1) **The Road to Character** David Brooks
- (7) **Girl in a Band: A Memoir** Kim Gordon
- (31) **This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs The Climate** Naomi Klein
- (14) **Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind** Yuval Harari
- (30) **What If?: Serious Scientific Answers to Absurd Hypothetical Questions** Randall Munroe

Paperback Non-Fiction

- (88) **The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America** Thomas King
- (10) **They Left Us Everything: A Memoir** Plum Johnson
- (109) **Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail** Cheryl Strayed
- (46) **The Boys in the Boat** Daniel James Brown
- (38) **Unbroken** Laura Hillenbrand
- (11) **Intolerable: A Memoir Of Extremes** Kamal Al-Solaylee
- (10) **The Brain That Changes Itself** Norman Doidge
- (14) **Alan Turing: The Enigma: The Book That Inspired the Film The Imitation Game** Andrew Hodges
- (215) **The Golden Spruce: A True Story of Myth, Madness and Greed** John Vaillant
- (7) **Fatty Legs: A True Story** Christy Jordan-Fenton

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