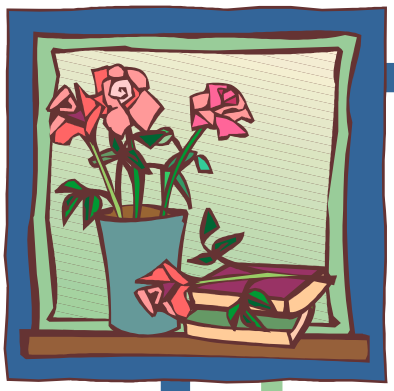


Shelburne Public Library

Selected Book Reviews

for

Rose's Thursday Night Book Club

Tel: 519-925-2168

Title: The Children's Book

Author: A.S. Byatt

Book Review by Peter Kemp. *The Sunday Times* (April 26, 2009).

Retrieved from http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article6154246.ece

A panoramic cavalcade of a novel, The Children's Book spans a quarter of a century from 1895 to the aftermath of the first world war, crisscrosses Britain and Europe, follows the intersecting fortunes of four families and swarms with vivid subsidiary characters, from real-life figures such as Oscar Wilde, Auguste Rodin and Marie Stopes to an invented cast of late-Victorian and Edwardian writers, artists, anarchists, City financiers, Fabian progressives, potters, puppeteers, dons, debutantes, New Women, suffragettes, soldiers, philanthropists and philanderers.

Easily the best thing AS Byatt has written since her Booker-winning masterpiece, Possession (1990), it shares strong affinities with it. Possession opened in an institution full of cultural riches, the London Library. The Children's Book begins in another, the South Kensington Museum (later the Victoria and Albert). As three boys wander among its fabulous collection, the mother of one of them, Olive Wellwood, a charming and successful writer in her thirties, consults the curator about a tale of ancient treasure she is planning.

Part modelled on E Nesbit, the celebrated author of Edwardian classics such as The Railway Children, Olive is a writer of children's stories who has a large young family of her own. Reactivating the flair for period pastiche put to such dazzling effect in Possession, Byatt artfully reproduces several of Olive's fantasy tales as well as portraying the first-night performance of a Peter Pan-ish play she writes, whose hero is based on her eldest son. All of this accords with Byatt's perception that the era her novel resurrects was one when childhood became a subject of unique, intense fascination, reflected in a remarkable outpouring of child-centred fiction ranging from Kenneth Grahame's The Golden Age to Rudyard Kipling's Kim.

Fanning out from the bohemian menage of Olive and her husband (revelations of secrets within that detonate shocks in the narrative), the multiple storylines of The Children's Book take you into gritty, impoverished households among the Yorkshire coal mines and under the chemical fug pumped out from the chimneys and kilns of the Potteries, into smart metropolitan domestic circumstances and on edgy visits to the creepy Romney Marsh home of an Eric Gill-like craftsman and his cowed womenfolk. As it shifts between these contrasting locales, the novel opens up into a study of parenting and parentage (about which there are surprising disclosures), and of differing aspects of childhood. Childbirth (still high-risk, as several episodes convey) and child-rearing receive much attention. As she has done before, Byatt writes feelingly (and from

personal experience) about the death of a child. Ways in which careers and destinies can be shaped in early years are traced. Exploitation of children — physically, emotionally, psychologically and artistically — is explored.

As a backdrop to events in the novel, Byatt unrolls crisp summaries of political and social developments against which her characters' activities and ambitions are silhouetted. Intellectual zest keeps the book sizzling with ideas. But it is alive with imaginative energy, too. High among the qualities giving the book aesthetic appeal is its author's responsiveness to the art and artefacts of the era she is chronicling. Byatt is an author who has always seemed galvanized into creativity by other people's creations. Elizabethan poetry and painting inspired her novel The Virgin in the Garden (1978). Van Gogh's canvases stimulated its sequel, Still Life (1985), as the paintings of a later artist did with The Matisse Stories (1993). In The Children's Book, Grimm's Fairy Tales and German puppet plays contribute to the narrative patterns, as do variants on scenarios from works by authors ranging from JM Barrie to HG Wells and DH Lawrence (Herbert Methley, a sexually predatory novelist on the prowl for young women attending high-minded symposiums and summer schools, is a scathing amalgam of the latter two). Most of all, Byatt's imagination is fired by objets d'art of the period. With several finely skilled potters among her characters, her pages flame with rapturous appreciation of lustres and glazes. In similar mode, one of the highlights in this novel, which revels in crowd scenes and interiors crammed with artworks, is a visit to the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris.

Incongruous among the art-nouveau elegancies here, the largest exhibits on show are Schneider-Creusot's long-range cannon and Vickers Maxim's rapid-fire machine guns. At the end of the novel, they come into their own on the Western front, where thousands of lost boys disappear. Brilliantly following the trajectory that brought a civilization and a generation to this catastrophe, The Children's Book is a work that superlatively displays both enormous reach and tremendous grip.

Title: Not Yet: A Memoir of Living and Almost Dying
Author: Wayson Choy

Book Review by Mark Medley. *National Post* (April 11, 2009)

Wayson Choy's humanity, and his deep connections to people and the world around him, come to the fore in Not Yet, a harrowing and incandescent memoir of the writer's brushes with death in the early years of this decade.

In August, 2001, in the humidity of a Toronto summer night, Choy, at 63, suffered a severe asthma attack that was linked to "multiple cardiac events." He was kept in a medically induced stupor for 11 days to reduce the risk of brain damage. His recounting of these events, rooted in his own memories, the accounts of the friends who sat vigil over him and the hospital records, is at once disturbing in its immediacy and vividly thought-provoking in its implications.

Anyone who has spent time under sedation will recognize the hallucinatory quality of slipping under the surface of consciousness, the confusing welter of noises and voices, the sense of displacement that Choy deftly captures. There is also, however, a deeper level of introspection to these passages, as Choy reckons with his memories and the voices of his ancestors, as well as the friends who made their way to his bedside. It's a tour de force, at once immersive and removed, intense but thoughtful, all rendered in a tone not quite clinical but certainly free of histrionics and sentimentality.

Following the intensity of the first 60 pages, the memoir chronicles Choy's recovery. The attacks left him unable to write. He required intensive physiotherapy to regain his ability to walk. Almost more significant than the physical challenges, however, were the changes to his life.

His room, for example, previously a warren of books and a dust-collecting repository for a life of whimsical and unfocused collecting, became, as a result of his asthma, a death trap. Friends took it upon themselves to remake the room for him, disposing of his collections, packing his books, replacing his furniture, while he was still in the hospital.

Beneath the surface narrative of Choy's collapse and recovery, much of Not Yet is devoted to the community of friends he has assembled over the past four decades, relationships that run deeper than blood and create a space in the world for a man who has spent much of his life searching for aspects of his identity.

His friends Karl and Maria, for example, noticed his difficulties breathing before he did and drove him to the hospital during his collapse. Choy, Karl and Maria have co-owned and shared a house for decades, a domestic arrangement at once unusual but utterly fitting. It is that kind of intentional community building, of finding friends and holding them close, in whatever arrangements work best, that seems to characterize Choy's life and illuminates much of Not Yet.

He deals candidly with his attempts to slip back into "my life as usual," despite his doctor's orders. A trip to China to host a documentary on Confucius presents challenges to his identity on a number of levels (as a Chinese-Canadian and as an artist with integrity, among them), and on his return, he throws himself

back into work, and into the collecting and nesting habits of his old life. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the book comes full circle, with another attack, a second hospitalization and a moment of transcendence.

Not Yet is a powerful work, an account of a life almost lost, a questioning of how a life should be lived and an inquiry into the role of the past and its impact on the present. It is a chronicle of finding oneself after the deepest of traumas, in the arms and eyes of friends. It is a work that blends tension and sadness with joy and contemplation. And it is a reminder, as if we needed one, of why Wayson Choy is beloved, as a writer and as a man.

Title: Peace Like a River

Author: Leif Enger

Book Review by Katherine Dieckmann.*The New York Times Book Review* 106.36 (Sept 9, 2001): p19(1)

It's tough to give magic realism an all-American spin, since God always seems to get mixed up in the equation, transforming fragrant lyricism into something that, to all but true believers, seems implausible: the perfectly timed miracle. Such convenient mysticism crops up frequently in Leif Enger's unabashed throwback of a first novel. Set in rural Minnesota in the early 1960's, it might as well be staged in frontier days, with its spunky, resourceful characters, rough-and-tumble adventures and folksy homilies along the lines of "Yes, yes sir -- routine is worry's sly assassin." In this world of goose hunting and Bible quoting, it's virtually impassible to imagine that the story takes place just before Beatlemania and during the civil rights movement; even the appearance of an Airstream trailer seems jarringly anachronistic.

"Peace Like a River" revolves around the coming of age of a boy named Reuben Land, a reticent, well-meaning kid who was born with "swampy lungs," meaning that when dramatic convention requires it, he gasps for breath on cue. Reuben's life is turned up-side down after his older brother, Davy, shoots two intruders in their home, gets arrested, then breaks out of jail and flees town. So it is that the Land family -- Reuben and his father, who is a poetry-loving elementary school janitor, and Swede, his tomboyish little sister -- head off after Davy. (When the children were small, Dad was carried four miles by a tornado without suffering a scratch, and Mom skipped out on the family, apparently lacking an appreciation for a husband who is touched by angels.)

From here on out, "Peace Like a River" mostly traces the Lands' travails along the inevitable path to the lost son. There are myriad problems with this approach, the chief being that Davy never really comes alive as a character or seems particularly worthy of this dogged pursuit, beyond, the obvious motivation of blood ties. He's a symbol, stolid and ineffable, and he remains remote throughout. His sole function seems to be to demonstrate the principles of fate; or, as Reuben puts it, "History was built into Davy so thoroughly he could never see how it owned him."

Such sentiments seem a bit lofty coming from an 11-year-old narrator. While it's true that this is a tale, told in retrospect, the heightened, present-tense feeling serves to make Reuben come off as improbably, annoyingly wise when he says things like: "You can embark on new and steeper versions of your old sins, you know, and cry tears while doing it that are genuine as any," and describes traveling uphill on horseback as follows: "I could feel Fry angling upslope and my own rear slipping rumpward, a cumbrous type

of riding demanding on my part a chronic forward scoot taxing muscles novel to me." In fact, this book would be far more compelling and convincing if Swede, a burgeoning young poet, were at its center, the sole girl in a male dominated family, refreshingly cool and no-nonsense as she struggles toward creative self-definition. But Enger's fusty traditionalism demands that this be a boy's own story.

And when that story becomes too plain, along comes a well-timed miracle to juice it up. A pot short on soup, for example, suddenly becomes bottomless when a stranger shows up for dinner. We know this kind of thing stems from Reuben's oddly spiritual father, because early on the boy sees him step off the end of a flatbed truck and walk on air. Given the usual fate of noble innocents, it's no surprise that dad meets a less than joyful ending during the novel's climactic shootout.

It is testimony to Enger's storytelling skills that this final bit of action is possessed of a certain breathless energy; as cliched as his basic enterprise is, he manages to infuse sections of this novel with some surprisingly lively writing and deftly turned sentences. But ultimately the book suffers from a surplus of pretension (one chapter is titled "The Throbbing Heart of News") and a dearth of surprises. Enger's world, full of simple pleasures and populated by deep-thinking naifs, seems unlikely to have ever existed, in this century or any other.

Katherine Dieckmann is a writer and film director living in New York City.

Book Review by Brad Hooper. *Booklist* 97.18 (May 15, 2001)

What readers will appreciate first in Enger's marvelous novel is the language. His limpid sentences are composed with the clarity and richness for which poets strive. It takes longer to get caught up in the story, but gradually, as the complex narrative unwinds, readers will find themselves immersed in an exceptionally heartfelt and moving tale about the resilience of family relationships, told in retrospect through the prism of memory. "We all hold history differently inside us," says narrator Reuben, who was an adolescent in Minnesota in the 1960s, when his brother, Davy, shot and killed two young men who were harassing the family. Rueben's father--in Rueben's estimation fully capable of performing miracles even though the outside world believed him to be lost in the clouds--packs Reuben and his sister up and follows the trail Davy has left in his flight from the law. Their journey comprises the action in the novel, but this is not really a book about adventures on the road. Rather, it is a story of relationships in which the exploration of character takes precedence over incident. Enger's profound understanding of human nature stands behind his compelling prose.

Title: Still Alice: A Novel

Author: Lisa Genova

Book Review by Ann Jonas. *The St. Cloud Visitor*.

Retrieved from http://www.csbsju.edu/bookstore/StillAliceBookReview.htm

Still Alice is a novel about Alice Howland, a cognitive psychology professor at Harvard, who finds out at age fifty that she has Alzheimer's disease. Alice is not only a celebrated professor at the height of her career, but is also a world-renowned expert in linguistics. She is happily married with three adult children. Her story begins with some minor but nagging forgetfulness, including forgetting names, words in conversation and where she put her Blackberry. She then has an incident in which she goes on her daily run and becomes confused as to where she is. Alice decides to consult a neurologist, who gives her the devastating diagnosis of early-onset Alzheimer's disease. The book tells of Alice's struggle to maintain her independence and lifestyle as she deals with her increasing forgetfulness and confusion. She initially is unable to share the diagnosis with her husband, who is a biologist and somewhat absorbed in his research. When she is finally able to break the news to him, he has a hard time believing her and asks the neurologist to do genetic testing to confirm his diagnosis. The testing confirms the bad news and, in addition, the neurologist tells them that her early-onset Alzheimer's disease has a strong genetic linkage, which adds to their concerns.

Alice keeps the diagnosis from her colleagues at Harvard and tries to continue both her classroom and lecture schedule. During the semester of her diagnosis she forgets the subject of one of her lectures and doesn't realize she is the professor in another. Eventually she makes the difficult decision to resign from teaching.

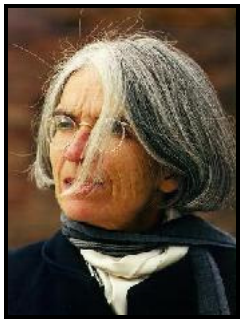
As Alice's dementia progresses, the family dynamics change. Her husband struggles with the opportunity to accept a once-in-a lifetime position in a new city, knowing the change will adversely affect Alice. Their children struggle with losing their mother as they know her and with deciding whether or not to be tested for the genetic mutation prevalent in early-onset Alzheimer's disease.

Still Alice is written with a great deal of compassion and realism. Genova tackles a difficult subject, but does so in a very gentle and caring way. The book certainly gives the reader a sense of what it must be like to live with Alzheimer's disease. Mark Warner of Alzheimer's Daily News describes the book as "the best portrayal of the Alzheimer's journey that I have read."

Author Genova, who holds a PhD in neuroscience from Harvard, self-published Still Alice in 2007. Publisher Simon & Schuster purchased the rights to the book, which will be available January 6 from Pocket Books. Genova's grandmother had Alzheimer's disease and as she visited with her, Genova became fascinated with the progression of the disease. She wondered "What is having Alzheimer's disease like from the point of view of the person with Alzheimer's?" This question was the seed of Still Alice. Genova did a considerable amount of research and collection of stories from people in the early stages of Alzheimer's, who could still describe what it's like to have dementia. She is an online columnist for the National Alzheimer's Association. These credentials make Still Alice seem like a true story and a very worthwhile read.

Title: About Face: A Commissario Guido Brunetti Mystery

Author: Donna Leon



Book Review by MARILYN STASIO. *The New York Times* Sunday Book Review (April 24, 2009)

A soft snow falls lightly on Venice in ABOUT FACE, Donna Leon's latest mystery featuring Commissario Guido Brunetti, a sight so precious that "Brunetti closed his eyes from the joy of it." But it will take more than one snowfall to cleanse the ground-in corruption that's revealed when this simpatico police detective investigates the local connections to the murder of a man who owned a trucking company in Lombardy. Leon sounds an angry alarm about the environmental damage done when mafias are allowed to take over toxic-waste disposal, and Brunetti despairs of being able to defend his city, poised on the "welcoming and oh-so-unprotected waters" of its lovely *laguna*

It would be easy to punch holes in a contrived subplot, thick with symbolism, about a beautiful young woman whose face was ruined by cosmetic surgery. But who would want to, when Leon is being so generous with the humanizing details that make this series special? There are long walks in Brunetti's warm company and lively talks with his clever wife and even more engaging father-in-law, who can see the appetites of a modern consumer society reflected in a 17th-century portrait. As detective work goes, it's a tiny masterpiece of analysis.

Title: The Winter Vault
Author: Anne Michaels

Book Review by Alison Pick. *The Walrus* (April 29, 2009).

Retrieved from http://www.walrusmagazine.ca/articles/2009.05-spring-book-review-the-winter-vault-anne-michaels

Thirteen years after the acclaimed Fugitive Pieces, Anne Michaels returns to the world of fiction with The Winter Vault, an evocative story of loss and redemption. Her first novel won accolades worldwide, and The Winter Vault will be measured against it, especially after such a long wait. I'm reluctant to review it on these terms, however; it is a thing of beauty unto itself, with pleasures and merits of its own.

The Winter Vault tells the story of Avery, a young engineer in the '60s, part of a team responsible for relocating and thus preserving the sacred temples at Abu Simbel prior to the damming of the Nile River. While in Egypt, Avery's young wife, Jean, pregnant with their first child, suffers a stillbirth. It is a personal tragedy of epic proportions, but one she nonetheless struggles to contextualize within the greater public loss — of villages, cultures, history — caused by the dam. The Winter Vault is characterized by Michaels' signature prose, lyric and sensual, but she skillfully pulls back in the face of the lost baby, replacing her layered imagery with a few swift strokes. The result is effectively unsettling — we are left wondering what the inner landscape of such a troubling experience might look like — and when the book returns to this crucial event in the final, brief chapter, the effect is heart wrenching.

The second part of the novel focuses on Jean's new friendship with Lucjan, a Polish immigrant she meets serendipitously during a hiatus from Avery. Their intimacy primarily takes the form of conversation. There are long, meandering pages during which Lucjan tells Jean about his childhood after the war, about his own understanding of what it is to suffer. The characters in The Winter Vault live in a world of intense emotion and ethical grappling, "an engagement of mind…almost shattering in its pleasure." Freed from the shackles of groceries and telephone bills, their essences appear distilled or concentrated on the page. Luckily this paring down, under Michaels' sure hand, makes them not less human but more so. Her gift for subtlety reverberates throughout the rest of the book as well. The temple, for example — broken into blocks, moved piece by piece, creating a perfect replica, with something nonetheless lost in the process — there's a metaphor here, but one is hard pressed to say exactly what. The temple could be Jean and Avery's relationship, the perfect past compared with the invisibly fractured future; it could likewise be the universal loss compared with the individual (the smaller displacement of Jean's mother's garden, in jars on the floor of her apartment). The temple is in fact both of these things, and neither. The irreducibility of the world to human terms, Michaels seems to imply, is at the core of its inherent value.

Like Fugitive Pieces, The Winter Vault deserves to be savoured on the tongue, like the date trees on the banks of the Nile at summer's end, the "sweetness reaching its deepest concentration."

Title: The Forgotten Garden: A Novel

Author: Kate Morton

Book Review by Lynn Spencer.

Retrieved from http://www.likesbooks.com/cgi-bin/bookReview.pl?BookReviewId=7234

You know a book is good when nearly 600 pages seem to fly by in the blink of an eye. This very accurately describes my experience with **The Forgotten Garden**. Beautiful and bittersweet, this family saga roams from the turn of the 20th century to the modern day as it tells an intricate story of secrets, identity, and, ultimately, self-discovery.

The physical garden mentioned in the title lies at the heart of an intricate maze on an estate in Cornwall. To tell the history of the garden or its inhabitants in linear fashion would be to deprive readers of one of the singular glories of this book. The various stories in this novel are told in bits and pieces, jumping back and forth in time from the early 20th century to the 1970s and the current century. Rather then feeling jumpy, the narrative actually flows smoothly, allowing readers to gradually piece together bits of important information to solve the mystery just as the modern-day heroine does.

The book opens in 1913 aboard a ship bound for Australia. A small child has been left on the ship, told by a beautiful lady to hide until the lady returns for her. Except that she never does. We learn that the little girl winds up alone in Australia unable to tell anyone who she is. The dockmaster and his wife adopt the child informally, name her Nell, and raise her as their own. It is not until much later that Nell learns the truth - a revelation that permanently alters her world and sense of identity.

In the 21st century, we meet Nell's granddaughter Cassandra, who appears to be in her 30s. Nell essentially raised her and Cass returned to live with her grandmother in her final years. During Nell's final illness, Cass learns of Nell's adoption from her great-aunts. This sends her on a quest to Cornwall, armed with the only clues to Nell's identity that she can muster - the contents of a small suitcase found with Nell when she arrived in Australia, a deed to a mysterious property in England, and notes from Nell's own unsuccessful investigation in England in the 1970s.

From these beginnings, a vast tale of identities lost and found, and deep family secrets begins to emerge. The characters in the tale are interesting, and most are quite likable, so one cannot help wanting to know the truth and to understand what made them the people they ultimately became. The revelations are not easily gotten, nor does everything come out all at once in a neat little package. Instead, pieces of the puzzle start to fall gradually into place one by one. It's a richly textured reading experience and I felt truly sucked into the various worlds of Edwardian England and the modern day as I read.

Though the characters are primarily strong, I would have liked more insight into Nell as a person. Though Nell is interesting, it is much easier to feel drawn into the hearts and minds of Cass and some of the other characters. However, this author does excel at world-building. In addition to adding intriguing fairy tale flourishes to the mystery, she makes the Edwardian setting of the events leading to Nell's journey feel very real and rather forbidding. She also makes Cass's world come alive and her journey feels very real and immediate.

Though this tale contains many romantic elements (some ending more happily than others), it is still primarily women's fiction. I normally do not buy hardbacks because of the price, but this story impressed me so much that I would gladly spend the money. If you like well-crafted and deeply moody sagas, **The Forgotten Garden** will probably be just your cup of tea.

Title: An Imperfect Offering

Author: James Orbinski, M.D.

Book Review by Anonymous. *The Economist*. London: Sep 27, 2008. Vol. 388, Iss. 8599

Abstract (Summary)

An Imperfect Offering by James Orbinski, president of Médicins Sans Frontières (MSF) when the charity won the Nobel peace prize in 1999, tells the passionate tale of his own gore-filled experiences in dealing with atrocities around the world over the past two decades.

Full Text

Dr. Orbinski believed that humanitarianism, based on the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence, was outside--and even in some ways superior to--the messy business of politics. He soon discovered that politics matters a lot. Indeed, he now says that one of the greatest challenges facing humanitarianism is the blurring of boundaries between humanitarian assistance and the political objectives of military intervention. He offers no solutions; he simply tells the reader, through the tear-stained stories about those he has helped, why it is all so desperately important.

Book Review by Daniel Baird. *The Walrus* v. 5 no. 5 (June 2008) p. 95

Many crawled along the roadside beneath IVI their last remnants of clothing, too weak to walk," writes former international president of Médicins Sans Frontières James Orbinski in his moving memoir. "Many had given up and simply lay still. As we drew nearer to the feeding centre, I watched people's faces. They were drawn, emaciated and covered in a fine dust blown into their skin from days of walking in the desert wind." This description of Orbinski's arrival at a clinic in war-ravaged Somalia in 1992 aptly illustrates the almost unimaginable suffering he encountered and sought to assuage, and the compassion, reserve, and skill with which he writes about it.

An Imperfect Offering recounts the principal events in Orbinski's life that led him to commit himself to serving as a humanitarian doctor: his childhood in a poor working-class neighbou-hood in Montreal, his first

exposure to the Holocaust and Holocaust survivors at a shoe store, his decision to go to medical school rather than join a monastery, his conversations with a wise Benedictine monk. The book goes on to describe his often-harrowing missions in Somalia, Rwanda, Afghanistan, Zaire, Kosovo, and Sudan. Among the book's many remarkable elements is the degree to which, despite the staggering cruelty he has witnessed, Orbinski keeps his faith in humanity and the possibility of effecting change.

In addition to being a highly personal and wrenching memoir, An Imperfect Offering contains philosophical meditations on the nature of humanitarianism. "Humanitarianism is about more than medical efficiency or technical competence," Orbinski writes. "In its first moment, in its sacred present, humanitarianism seeks to relieve the immediacy of suffering, and most especially of suffering alone." One of the challenges he attempts to come to terms with is that humanitarianism's sacred present is never that simple: to relieve suffering, such organizations as MSF must negotiate the dangerous politics of failing states.

Title: Six Months in Sudan

Author: James Maskalyk

Book Review by Matthew Behrens. *Quill & Quire* (from the April 2009 issue)

The ongoing crisis in Darfur confronts us with the remarkable phenomenon of scholars, anthropologists, legal minds, and activists documenting a lengthy genocide-in-progress, with all parties seemingly powerless to stop the carnage. How can such intolerable human rights atrocities receive almost universal attention and condemnation, yet draw so little concrete reaction from the global community?

That question forms the central subject of the essay collection The World and Darfur. Like any product of an academic conference, this volume tends toward repetition, a style redolent of postgraduate term papers, and a distance that presents the issue as a cold analysis of policy, not people.

Essays include an analysis of the recent history of the region, the policy and institutional barriers that prevent real progress, and the tunnel vision that sees Darfur through mainly white, Eurocentric eyes in print media, art exhibitions, and political activism. Ironically, a number of essays in this collection suffer from exactly this kind of blinkered vision.

Discussions of ways in which the world might have responded more decisively in Rwanda are well executed here, as are examinations of the ways in which debates over semantics – does Darfur constitute ethnic cleansing, a humanitarian crisis, or genocide? – become a sideshow that does nothing to help those suffering on the ground.

While the individual contributors raise many good questions, a coherent set of solutions remains elusive. The collection is also notable for the voices that are missing, especially that of leading African scholar Mahmoud Mamdani, whose challenging take on Darfur, although briefly referenced in the introduction, may have provided a deeper understanding of why so much of the interventionist spirit among activists and politicians alike is shortsighted and, possibly, counterproductive.

Gerald Caplan hints at this broader perspective in his passionate opening essay, which questions whether the war-on-terror co-operation between Sudanese intelligence services and the CIA is the real roadblock to any progress toward ending the bloodshed.

Although Darfur garners much of the world's attention, millions of others in Sudan suffer the ravages of poverty and armed conflict spilling into their communities. One such war-torn village, Abyei, was recently home to a young Canadian doctor, James Maskalyk, whose memoir Six Months in Sudan recalls the sights and sounds of an impoverished medical outpost.

Maskalyk was posted there by Médicins Sans Frontières. Six Months is full of stories that range in format from ER drama (right down to his makeshift recreation of M*A*S*H-like operating room scenes) to blog entries Maskalyk wrote to update friends and family.

The author is an interesting, if not always sympathetic, individual who questions throughout why he has chosen to go to a place where he struggles constantly with the blistering heat, the parasites, his own deep-seated cynicism, and the emotional distancing that happens when one is surrounded by misery and death.

Inspired by culture shock upon his return to Canada and his inability to deal with questions about his experience, Maskalyk attempts to get it all down (perhaps as an act of decompression therapy), resulting in a work that, while interesting, is overly long and full of recalled dialogue that provides too much colour at the expense of keeping the story moving.

Indeed, it takes over 200 pages to sense the emotional kernel at the heart of the story: Maskalyk wants those of us in the comfortable West to really understand how bad it is in places like Sudan. A noble desire, but one that tends to get lost in the focus on Maskalyk's own search for meaning, against which the people he treats often fade to backdrop.

While both The World and Darfur and Six Months in Sudan are important reminders of injustice a world away, it is not clear how they will ultimately engage and challenge readers to move beyond the very distancing syndrome they seek to eliminate.

Book Review by Rachel Giese *The Walrus* (May 2009).

Retrieved from
http://mail.walrusmagazine.com/articles/2009.05-walrus-reads-spring-book-review-six-months-in-sudan/

Despite a series of trips spent ministering to the sick in some of the most desperate corners of the earth, Toronto physician James Maskalyk is the last person who would relish being likened to a saint. As he explains in his commanding new memoir about the half-year he worked for the international aid group Médecins Sans Frontières, altruism is only part of what drives him. There's also his congenital restlessness; he keeps his belongings to a backpack-sized minimum, maintains a hazy attachment to a girlfriend, and works in an emergency room to avoid the commitment of a full-time practice. Mostly, though, he's haunted by an experience from medical school, when he had to tell a patient that she had a fatal brain tumour. "For the first time," he writes, "[I] understood that though I was living, I was also dying."

So, in an effort to stare down his mortality, Maskalyk decides to sidle up to death, to live in what he considers "the real world" of urgent need, disease, and suffering. And in Abyei, a charmless outpost in central Sudan, he finds more than enough of the real world — from his multinational tribe of exhausted colleagues to the post-colonial antipathy and global oil greed that have held the nation in a near-constant state of conflict for decades. While the town is removed from the worst horrors of the genocide to the west in Darfur, war is never far away; alongside patients suffering from malaria, tuberculosis, malnutrition, and measles, there are those wounded by grenades, bullets, and rapes. Yet, somehow, Maskalyk manages to remain optimistic: "Hope," he writes, "not only meets despair in equal measure, it drowns it."

Like James Orbinski, one of the founders of MSF Canada and the author of his own acclaimed memoir, An Imperfect Offering (2008), Maskalyk finds his purpose in bearing witness to lives — and deaths — that might otherwise be overlooked. Six Months in Sudan began as (what else?) a blog, and Maskalyk's initial posts set off a small controversy; some critics suggested that blogging about such missions commodifies humanitarianism. But his empathy is palpable. A reticent man by nature, made even more so by the desolation of Abyei, he seems most himself among his patients and the local medical staff, particularly

Mohamed, a warm-hearted young doctor from Khartoum, and Aweil, a resilient orphan, whom Maskalyk briefly — and rashly — considers adopting.

As he details daily life on the drab compound — the inescapable heat and dust, the terrible food served by their hostile Sudanese cook, the petty bullying of the local militia — and the wrenching demands of the hospital, the book is vivid, and at times even funny. Surprisingly, it's when Maskalyk returns to Canada that he, and, to a degree, his writing, becomes self-conscious. It's as if having travelled to "the real world" of Sudan, he can no longer be at home in his own. Of his fellow aid workers he writes, "We talk about how difficult it is to assimilate, to assume routine, to sample familiar pleasures... The rift, of course, is not in the world: it is within us."

"You can never get a cup of tea large enough
or a book long enough to suit me."
-- C.S. Lewis