

Carmella Gray-Cosgrove, Nowadays and Lonelier

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BOOK/THEATRE/EXHIBIT REVIEW

Carmella Gray-Cosgrove, *Nowadays and Lonelier*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 2021. 217 pp. \$19.95.

Wrapped in a wicked cover making the best use of expired matchsticks since Joel Thomas Hynes's *We'll All Be Burnt in Our Beds Some Night* and bearing blurbs from some of the coolest Canadian authors, the contents of Carmella Gray-Cosgrove's debut short story collection earn their packaging. The narratives of *Nowadays and Lonelier* sear through their pages and into the minds of their readers. There is a chain-smoking aspect to the way these stories are presented — at times the dying flames of one flare up to spark the beginnings of another and readers will consume them quickly as the collective tension rises. Gray-Cosgrove's stories reward rereading — she always seems to have several fires going and sometimes the smoke lingers and mingles in interesting and unexpected ways.

Twenty-plus years and a generation or two removed from the early days of the Burning Rock Collective and *Hearts Larry Broke*, the current St. John's literary landscape seems peopled largely by Hearts Lisa Lifted. One would be hard-pressed to find a recent publication from a new Newfoundland and Labrador writer that does not list Lisa Moore in its acknowledgements. And in the short story collections growing out of Moore's creative writing classes one will find the names of some of the province's (and country's) more talented and challenging voices: Sharon Bala, Bridget Canning, William Ping, Heidi Wicks, et cetera. Gray-Cosgrove belongs to this community as well, not just because she lists Moore in her acknowledgements (and effuses "You changed my life"), but also because Gray-Cosgrove's stories undeniably bear

the stamp of Moore's literary tendencies and influence. Fans of Moore's work, from *Degrees of Nakedness* to *This is How We Love*, will find in *Nowadays and Lonelier* the same balancing act of narrative present punctuated with the profundity of people, predicaments, and places that surround it.

The first story of the collection is a fine example. The narrator of "The Dance of the Cygnets" is studying ballet and preparing for an end-of-term performance of *Swan Lake*. On her commute to and from school she listens to an audiobook that is most definitely the work of a Suzanne Simard acolyte (Peter Wohlleben?): "I am listening to the book about the trees to stop the steps from 'Dance of the Cygnets' from running through my head." There are more than dance steps running through the narrator's head as her drug-addicted twin sister's recent suicide attempt triggers memories of their father's death by overdose when they were twelve. The narrator loves her sister but the relationship is complicated: "She likes it when she knows I feel insecure. Like it reassures her that there are lots of people out there who are better than me and that she is on the better path in life. She has always been like that. Helping me tear myself down so she can rise up. Even though her up is always assisted by something. Coke most often, but speed, too, and crack in a pinch." The sister calls during the narrator's commute just as the audiobook is discussing a forest of cloned trees while the narrator is mentally dancing through the most demanding part of her routine. It is difficult to tell what is blocking out what in her cluttered brain:

"The nurses suck here. Are you even listening to me?" she asks.

The hardest part of the "Dance of the Cygnets" is the fifteen pas de chats starting from upstage right and traveling across all in perfect unison....

"They say I'm in withdrawal, but they have me on such a cocktail of things that I can't feel it," she says.

Pas de chat, pas de chat, pas de chat, pas de chat, pas de chat, pas de chat, pas de chat, pas de chat, pas de chat. Pando reminds

me of the four cygnets. Tree clones and baby swans. Things that are the same as other things but somehow are still their own entities.

The narrative present of this story is a few quotidian moments on a bus. Gray-Cosgrove shows her readers that these are the moments when life happens. Not one tidy story but the scrambling of many.

This mixing of narratives continues into the second story from which the collection derives its title. “Nowadays and Lonelier” reads like a brainstorming exercise from a creative writing class in which several possible stories take turns being proposed and plotted:

A story about a family’s former babysitter who is a Jehovah’s Witness. Years after she has stopped babysitting for them, she cold-calls the mother and sets up a date to visit. When she shows up she is wheeling an overnight bag behind her. It clacks over the threshold.

A story that culminates in a car accident between a funeral procession and a young couple.

A story about a city that is overrun with war memorials to the point that it’s hard to move through the streets because the statues are so close together. A forest of hard bronze men holding rifles in various positions.

The young couple in the car accident are fooling around when they crash into the funeral procession on the bridge. Lou is driving. Daria is going down on him, the emergency brake digging into her ribs as she leans over from the passenger seat.

The surrealist city of statues and the road-head-road-hazard couple return in stories of their own near the end of the collection. The effect on the reader is less a feeling of connection or culmination and more a feeling of nagging familiarity. Leafing back to “Nowadays and Lonelier” and realizing that, yes, they *did* read something like this before, the reader then revisits the other snippets of stories-in-progress made all

the more interesting for not having made it into this collection, but no doubt existing in some form elsewhere: “A story about a young woman who is stranded on an ice pan and floats into the harbour just north of St. John’s. She keeps herself alive in the rank, but warm, carcass of a seal.” In this way does Gray-Cosgrove make her collection feel like a living, shifting, evolving thing even as it rests in her reader’s hands.

The note on the author informs that Gray-Cosgrove grew up in Vancouver and now lives in St. John’s. Her stories and her characters follow her: we meet a young woman working as a nanny in Vancouver during the 2010 Winter Olympics; another struggling as a waitress in frigid Montreal; the circle of family, friends, and not-so-nodding acquaintances around a young man returning to St. John’s to testify in the case against the priest who molested him. Gray-Cosgrove does well to weave a line of disconnection through her narratives: she touches down to catch a moment of what appears to be truth without lingering so long that she burns out these people and their particular moments. The result is a satisfyingly complete collection of unfinished stories.

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