

Catherine Safer. *Bishop's Road*.

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long Myrden's moments of happiness. *Inside* overwhelms while leaving its readers desperate for more — and such is the mark of any great novel.

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Catherine Safer. *Bishop's Road*. St. John's: Killick Press, 2004, ISBN 1-894294-78-5

A REVIEW OF FICTION conventionally features a plot summary. This review of Catherine Safer's debut novel, *Bishop's Road*, might fall short of readers' expectations. No plot summary could adequately condense Safer's novel, partly because the book already feels, in many ways, like a series of plot summaries. It's not that *Bishop's Road* lacks a plot; rather, this novel is overstocked with plotting. A sampling of these plots includes: enforced stint in asylum; incest; prostitution; gaybashing; windfall inheritance from invisible mother; sudden fame at modelling; abusive boss; child raised unbeknownst by uncle; incarceration; reincarnation; miscarriage; unwanted child; post-traumatic muteness; performing "Nativity"; spousal abuse (physical, psychological, emotional); and murder. The plot details lend themselves to comparison with serial television programming, rather than with the fragmented narratives of Pat Barker's *Union Street* or Thomas Pynchon's pastiches. Although readers may be compelled by Safer's play with dialect and narration and perhaps initially tantalized by the foreshadowing of such melodramatic plots, they will probably be disappointed by their rapid resolutions.

The primary setting, a boarding house that was formerly a convent on Bishop's Road in downtown St. John's, promises at the novel's start to be densely symbolic. Wedged between a Catholic church and a school, and up the road from a former orphanage, the house is depicted from the outset as being "quite familiar with haunted dreams" (2). Though Father Delaney from next door has vowed never to return there (19), the house's ghostliness is never connected to its former religious tenants. Instead, a series of secular characters drag around their own repressed memories, and many of the novel's plots involve an exposure of these characters' pasts. The central cast includes Mrs. Mifflin, who runs the boarding house, and five tenants: Eve, Ruth, Ginny Mustard, Maggie, and Judy. Each of these characters, as well as a few others (including Dorrie and Joanie, who become perhaps too central as the novel progresses), has suffered some form of abuse. Indeed, the novel could be read as a laying bare of various forms of spousal and child abuse.

The mysterious forces causing the initial "disturbance" (18) within the house remain unclear. An odd atmosphere pervades, perhaps the result of restless, reincarnated Eve — yes, of *The Garden* — who "is generally content but for missing Adam" (8) and is on an "earth walk" (158) or perhaps because of troubled and troublesome Judy, who has "something hovering about her and shining through her

eyes all the time put[ting] them on edge" (27). For all of the mystery suggested throughout the novel, however, the narration becomes too expository in the unravelling of the numerous, separate narrative strands. Safer does not rely on "suddenly," the adverbial hallmark of convenience and overwriting. Many of the individual narratives within the novel, however, are related "all of a sudden." Time and again, a mystery connected to a specific character gives way, abruptly, to clichéd, melodramatic explanation. Denied the readerly pleasure of piecing together puzzling fragments, readers are left a little disappointed, their task made redundant by overt authorial manipulation.

Consider one story prominent at the beginning of the novel, which involves a baby's skeleton and a skulking man. This narrative differs from many in the text, in that not one or two, but several instances of foreshadowing precede its unfolding. References — vague enough to be enigmatic, though too numerous to remain intriguing — are spaced out over 50-odd pages. Although it is thus set up to be an incident of significance, the conflict is suddenly relayed and resolved, as illustrated by the following series of events.

From the first reference to the "small bones" (12), we learn that the lullaby they are singing, "Hush Little Baby," is audible only to Ginny Mustard, whose mother sang this song before abandoning the newborn Ginny in the hospital (13). Apparently triggered by Ginny's humming along to the attic skeleton's song, Mrs. Miflin drops boiling water on her legs (21) and is put out of commission for much of the novel. Meanwhile, the near-omniscient narrator alone sees the man lurking outside the orphanage throughout the night, though several characters notice "the strong scent of something ugly" (33) he leaves in his wake. The storyline unravels quickly after this first reference to him. Ginny finds the baby's bones and reveals (35) them to her house-mates. Although Ruth initially suggests filing a police report (35), they decide instead to keep the baby, which Ginny treats as if it is alive (40). Showing up at the door, the filthy lurker turns out to be Mrs. Miflin's estranged husband, who, Mrs. Miflin explains, had kicked her when she was seven months pregnant and caused her to miscarry (58). While Mrs. Miflin had misfired in her murder attempt soon after his attack on her and plugged him in the crotch (58), Ginny now shoots and kills him (60) with a gun she has happened upon in the attic (44). Between pages 58 and 60 we learn the man's identity, hear his crime, and witness his murder.

The immediate aftermath of Mr. Miflin's death exemplifies another of the novel's shortcomings: the characters' apparent deficiency in curiosity, suspicion, and logic. Safer's characters passively accept bizarre or extreme situations and events, in a manner akin to characters on daytime television series faced with yet another possession by the devil. Slightly ruffled at first by the murder, the boarders on Bishop's Road soon agree that Ginny was in the right (63) and "plot to save [her] and conceal her wrongdoing" (63), by stuffing him into a freezer (63).

Crafting characters that mutely accept any strange occurrence permits Safer to overpopulate her novel with melodramatic plots. Conveniently enough, Ruth acknowledges that the freezer solution is “a bit cliché to be sure but [she] can’t think of anything else at the moment” (63). The characters accept all, and the readers are meant to follow suit. Readers, though, yearn for some explanation of the characters’ credulity. For all of the details she delivers within these plotbursts, Safer keeps her readers from forging strong connections to her characters, by relying on fantastic, brief plots and narratorial exposition for characterization.

Catherine Safer enjoyed writing this novel. Readers cannot help but sense the sheer joy that must have come to Safer from the process of brainstorming, of drumming up improbable plots. Writerly pleasure is also evident in the way Safer inflects characters’ speech with eccentricities of dialect. For instance, listen as Mrs. Miflin introduces Judy to the other boarders: “*This here* young lady goes by the name of Judy and is living with you now thanks to Social Services who couldn’t find anyone else who’d have her *being as she’s what you’d call* a delinquent.... Judy eat *them peas*. I got no patience for fancy eating diseases in this house. I made a nice trifle for dessert, and I’m not bringing it out until *them plates is polished*” (11, italics mine).

Readers will also find fascinating Safer’s occasional play with the narration. Notice, for example, the shift in voice in the following passage: “Mrs. Miflin is waking from her madness or perhaps scraping the bottom of it but no matter. There is a fury boiling in her. Memory is alive in vivid colour of each wrong done her for the last few months beginning with *that damned Judy coming here to live*” (127, italics mine). Within this excerpt, the straight description by the narrator is infused with discourse identifiable to readers as Mrs. Miflin’s.

Catherine Safer obviously has a galloping imagination and many stories to tell. Readers can look forward to Safer’s next novel. Having achieved some success with *Bishop’s Road* (which was a finalist in the 2005 Amazon.ca / Books in Canada First Novel Award), Safer should have the confidence to limit the number of stories she attempts to relate and to devote more time and space to the artful development of her narratives.

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Ken Babstock. *Airstream Land Yacht*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2006, ISBN 0887847404

IN *AIRSTREAM LAND YACHT*, poet Ken Babstock builds on the successes of his two previous collections, *Mean* (1999) and *Days Into Flatspin* (2001). Readers familiar with his work will recognize immediately the author’s distinctive touch, as in these