

Book Reviews

Book Review Editor's Note: *The Canadian Field-Naturalist* is a peer-reviewed scientific journal publishing papers on ecology, behaviour, taxonomy, conservation, and other topics relevant to Canadian natural history. In line with this mandate, we review books with a Canadian connection, including those on any species (native or non-native) that inhabits Canada, as well as books covering topics of global relevance, including climate change, biodiversity, species extinction, habitat loss, evolution, and field research experiences.

Currency Codes – CAD Canadian Dollars, USD US Dollars, EUR Euros, AUD Australian Dollars, GBP British Pound.

POETRY

Welcome to the Anthropocene

By Alice Major. 2018. The University of Alberta Press. 136 pages, 19.95 CAD, Paper.

Poets work like naturalists or scientists. What they do is based on what has gone before. Alexander Pope wrote *Essay on Man*, one of the most quoted poems in the English language, in the 18th century. It is in Heroic Couplets, five-beat lines that rhyme AA, BB, CC, and so on. This collection is written in Alberta, in the 21st century. Its title poem, “Welcome to the Anthropocene”, has the same metre and rhyme scheme, and uses Pope’s poem as a platform for a survey of the world the poet sees.

Pope, writing in the century of Newton, Leibniz, and The Great Chain of Being, could explore his universe and conclude, emphatically, “Whatever is, is right”. Alice Major was born in Scotland, grew up in Toronto, has worked in British Columbia, was Poet Laureate of Edmonton, and now lives in Calgary. She writes in the age of quantum physics and climate change, and has her doubts. Pope’s heroic couplets march across the page with the regularity dictated by the Laws of Motion, and can tire the reader. Major softens her verse with offbeats and imperfect rhymes:

Nature solves
her vast equations without fuss – the scrawls
of protein folding, evolving puzzles
posed by careering quantum particles.

Pope rebukes some of his contemporaries for the sin of pride. Major explores “post-natural creation”:

Welcome, transgenic zebrafish. Your shades
of trademarked colours—*Starburst red*,
Electric Green, and *Cosmic Purple*—bred
to decorate aquariums
in colour schemes to match our rainbow whims.

“Welcome to the Anthropocene” is a long poem, 21 pages. The poet’s wry, somewhat sad wit, leavened by her scientific knowledge, comes to a not unhelpful conclusion:

We might not unite
behind Pope’s verse *Whatever is, is right*.
Still, whatever is, matters, in a wholeness where
everything is common and everything is rare.

There are a number of other fine poems, of varying lengths, touching a lot of subjects, with influences that seem to range from Gerard Manley Hopkins to a Peterson Field Guide. Major is good at inventing verse forms that suit the material she wants to address. In English poetry there is not likely another poem with a title like this:

Catena
2.71828 1828 4590 4523 5360 2874 7135 2...

There is a note that explains the mathematical significance of the formula, but the poem is a moving meditation on the randomness of genetics and one of the things poetry tries hardest to deal with:

The slowing increments of loss
when it can’t get any worse, or
any better. The sad slog up, to stand
on something that approaches solid ground.

A poet living on the prairies can be expected to set some of her poems on farmland. This poet doesn’t mind a dirty pun, in “Annual Grains”:

Agriculture’s pornographic fact:
.....No truly wild plant spends
so much of its energy on sex,
on putting out, on hanging on
to seed heads that should scatter, shatter
small grains into earth’s soft box

Major apparently lives in the city though, and works in an office:

hickory dickory click
of computer mice from adjoining cubicles
tick tick-tick tick

The reader will find more mice, but birds are the fauna that have always most attracted poets. There are a lot of birds, including the marvellous corvid that in eastern Canada we don't get:

Magpie as neighbour. You've moved in,
hold your raucous parties, shout at the kids.
Fix up your house – a slipshod DIY
endeavour that always seems half-done. Twigs
strewn all around the yard.

The poet has had fun writing these poems, which is a good sign for the reader. The poems are serious, but the reader can expect to have fun reading them.

The following is excerpted from "Welcome to the Anthropocene" by Alice Major:

Now, welcome to the Anthropocene
you battered, tilting globe. Still you gleam,
a blue pearl on the necklace of the planets.
This home. Clouds, oceans, life forms span it
from pole to pole, within a peel of air
as thin as lace lapped round an apple. Fair
and fragile bounded sphere, yet strangely tough—
this world that life could never love enough.
And yet its loving-care has been entrusted
to a feckless species, more invested
in the partial, while the total goes unnoticed.

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