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Bohemians in and out of Toronto

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Abstract

Book review of: Katherine Govier, *Fables of Brunswick Avenue*, Markham, Penguin (Canada), 1985, pp. 253, C. \$7.95, paperback.

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BOHEMIANS IN AND OUT OF TORONTO

Katherine Govier, *Fables of Brunswick Avenue*, Markham, Penguin (Canada), 1985, pp. 253, C. \$7.95, paperback.

"Everyone lives on Brunswick Avenue sooner or later". Although only some stories in Katherine Govier's collection are set in this dilapidated downtown Toronto street, lined with Victorian houses haphazardly divided into flats, all her major characters could have spent some period of their lives there. Precise and elegant fictions chronicle the adventures of sophisticated urban gypsies, "striving photographers, potters, film-makers, and graduate students in English or biology", either in their Brunswick Avenue days, or after they have moved into securely established careers, back to the provincial towns some originally came from, or away from Canada altogether into foreign parts. Travel in Europe may make Toronto appear "small, unimportant and colonial", but a Toronto citizen venturing into Western Canada "couldn't help but be a tourist, like the Japanese, the Americans" (p.119). Characters with the same names and rather similar backgrounds reappear in different stories. Hannah, the ageing, well-known poet who attends a government-sponsored conference on women writers in Edinburgh in *The Night-tender*, one of the high spots in the collection, is drunken and disreputable like Hannah, the elderly writer, "veteran of many migrations and marriages," in the opening story. But one Hannah lives on Brunswick Avenue, and the other on a farm in Devon. Is Ellen, the unmarried university professor, who introduces Hannah at the conference, the same Ellen of the stories *Tongues* and *Sociology*, married, pregnant and giving birth to her first child? How far should we identify Suzanne and Gemma who appear in *Going to Europe* with their namesakes in *Home for Good*? Such echoes and reflections contribute to a "self-addressing world" where people move in and out of one another's lives as they move in and out of one another's houses in Brunswick Avenue.

Despite the rootlessness of their characters, the stories paradoxically establish a strong sense of location, for Govier reveals a gift for description. A character returning to Calgary after some years' absence discovers the skyline has "sprung up like pistons" (p.171). Willow trees at Hanlan's Point "dropped their foliage thick as petticoats just inches above the ground. They stood like the governesses of any man's dreams, and the soft white mist clung to them" (p.74). Interiors, with all they signify of their inhabitants' lives, are brilliantly evoked. The narrator of

Brunswick Avenue recalls "Dark hardwood floors, warped to ridges which I felt with my bare feet as I walked them, claiming the place" (p.4), and Margaret, displaced by her husband's adultery in *The Thief*, rents an attic apartment which she paints a "relentless white", making it her own by "Adding objects like letters to a page" (p.28). More exotic interiors, like the restaurant in *The Garden* with "Bronze-tinted mirrors, hanging ferns, tropical trees, batik curtains", or the psychiatrist's consulting room in *The Dragon* with egg-shell walls, curtains of unbleached jute, a rug the colour of damp sand, and light coming from "frosted tubes running in trenches around the periphery of the ceiling" set a stage for the development of bizarre relationships and interactions.

Most of the stories focus on a particular type of character, a young woman in her late twenties or early thirties, an outsider whose nonconformist, rootless existence is sometimes indicated by her decision to live on Brunswick Avenue. The opening stories, particularly, concentrate on such figures, isolated by the threatened break-up of a close relationship or being forced to abandon unsatisfactory marriages and liaisons. Several of these women are aspiring artists, guilt-ridden by a sense of presumption, even when their work is judged successful. Their predicament is made still more ambivalent by an inability to decide whether they are victims or persecutors. One female outsider may be contrasted with another whose life is still more marginal, as various kinds of outsider status are weighed one against the other. After leading a revolt against a careless and exploitative landlady, the narrator in *Brunswick Avenue* realises years later that for her fellow tenants whose lives she fed on to create her fiction, she herself was "the other, the leech, the landlady". In *The Thief*, Margaret realises she has merely changed the role of wronged wife for that of adulteress and that the woman ravalling her in her husband's affections is equally vulnerable: "Because it was really the three of them, the madonna girl, the wife, and Margaret who belonged to each other and must speak" (p.39).

For all the poignancy, the note of angst is just a little too insistent in these initial stories, and the wry fantasy of those grouped in the middle of the collection forms a welcome contrast. In *The Garden*, reminiscent of an oriental tale, a restaurateur selects a harem of elegant waitresses to complement the exquisite décor, employing a homosexual head waiter as his eunuch, only to discover that the atmosphere of unapproachable and demure seductiveness he has created to entice and tantalise his customers is also impenetrable to his own desires. There is a touch of medieval

romance in *The Dragon* where a failed priest, jilted by the only woman he ever loved, turns psychiatrist, regularly telling patients they must not expect him to go out and slay the dragon. Eventually he sallies forth to kill his own dragon, the dangerous other, mistress of his favourite patient, himself transformed into a monster through repressed lust. *Eternal Snow* evokes hints of science fiction in its account of a ski-ing holiday where a young woman glimpses the face of her own death.

The remaining stories return again to the theme of the woman outsider and artist, whose rootlessness and sense of displacement is often underlined by the experience of foreign travel. Most are concerned in various ways with the dilemma stated by Hannah:

It is impossible to be a woman writer, impossible because of the need for man. You see ... the cock is unable to rise up in face of woman's words. (p.201)

The final group of stories complements those at the beginning by suggesting that, although loneliness still menaces, women may attain some precarious success in their struggle to balance artistic ambition and personal relationships. In the latter part of the collection, the theme of children is introduced. Whatever problems childbearing may raise for the woman artist, several stories suggest that it offers an alternative of sorts to the even more vexed problem of relationships with men. *The Dancer* ends with Anna, who has abandoned her job with a modern dance troupe, in the final stages of pregnancy: "It would not be long now before she had someone who would love her, always" (p.218). Elsewhere, however, Govier suggests that Anna's chosen solution may cause as many difficulties as it solves. One of the earlier stories, *The Independent Woman*, where Lasha, tormented by her sense of loneliness after a number of failed relationships, walks into the sea, possibly to drown herself, is balanced by *Palm Beach* which concludes the collection. In this, Sheila, within her sheltering family enclosure composed of husband and children, feels "all tied up in the centre with a deadly need to write", envying the woman on her own who seems to have abundant time. But although this story also ends with its protagonist walking into the sea, she remains undefeated.

She goes down, she is tumbled, taken in and then rejected, spat forward, a projectile. She scrabbles for the bottom and finds it. She gains her feet as the world slips backward under her and comes out on top. She always comes out on top. (p.253)

Govier provides a sharp and often painful insight into a certain kind of female experience, but although she emphasizes its bleakness, the collection as a whole ends on a note of cautious optimism.

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