

Between the covers, between the cracks: Some titles escaped our spotlight this year

BY IAN MCGILLIS, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE DECEMBER 20, 2013

<http://www.montrealgazette.com/entertainment/books/Between+covers+between+cracks+Some+titles+escaped+spotlight+this+year/9305487/story.html>

We keep reading and hearing about the imminent Death of the Book, but clearly lots of publishers — and writers, and, yes, readers — never got the memo. Every week brings a new wave of titles that for a variety of reasons — space limitations, timing, planetary misalignment — don't get the full review spotlight they deserve. With that in mind, before 2013 shuffles off the stage and the 2014 onslaught begins, here are a few better-late-than-never recommendations.

The comic campus novel, launched in its modern form in 1954 by Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* and long a thriving sub-genre, looked until recently to be on life support, but there's a revival afoot, exemplified by Michael Hingston's debut, *The Dilettantes* (Freehand, 272 pages, \$21.95). The tribulations of a student newspaper staff fighting both market forces (a free corporate-owned rag threatens their fragile readership) and their own ongoing youthful identity crises are depicted with toe-curling immediacy — and hilarity — by a writer close enough to his characters' ages that his viewpoint has the ring of lived truth. The campus in question is B.C.'s hippie-founded Simon Fraser University, but every seat of learning has its equivalents.

Hingston is also the books columnist for the *Edmonton Journal*, and in that capacity he was the first out of the blocks in spotting the sui generis genius of Norm Sibus's *The Traymore Rooms* (Biblioasis, 600 pages, \$24.95), a book whose very existence represents a delightful raspberry in the face of conventional market wisdom. Montrealer Sibus, best known as a poet (he won a QWF Award for his 2002 collection *Girls and Handsome Dogs*), does readers the

service of assuming that the conversations of a group of American expats in a Montreal apartment block are sufficient grist for an epic-length novel. There's a hint of David Foster Wallace's shaggy-dog conceptualism here, and of John Barth's postmodern metafiction, but rest assured, it's also just plain fun. I harboured a secret wish that *The Traymore Rooms* would show up on at least one of this year's major award short lists; it didn't happen, but you get the feeling this is a book that's going to stick around.

It's probably true that the potential readership for a book about the book trade by an inveterate book obsessive is by definition somewhat market-specific, but that doesn't make *The Pope's Book Binder* (Biblioasis, 421 pages, \$37.95), by David Mason, any less riveting and valuable. No less than a life seen through the lens of a love of books and literature, Toronto antiquarian Mason's memoir provides eloquent proof that Gutenberg's descendants are not ready to give up the good fight. Bibliophiles — you know who you are, folks — will find bottomless solace in these pages.

Bernadette Griffin's *Canine Confessions* (Laskin Publishing, 218 pages, \$17.75) is a family story as told by the family dog, albeit one uncommonly articulate and culturally informed by four-legged standards; it also functions as an absorbing sociopolitical history of Montreal in the turbulent 1970s. We've seen a kennel full of dog's-eye novels in the past decade or so; this is one of the best. (Full disclosure: The author showed me an early draft of this novel, and I later provided the publisher with a blurb.)

Among the uniformly high standard already established by Linda Leith's fledgling indie literary publishing house, a standout is Jennifer Quist's debut novel, *Love Letters of the Angels of Death* (Linda Leith Publishing, 222 pages, \$16.95), an extended meditation on matrimony and mortality that flits with remarkable assurance between the naturalistic and the supernatural, the sad and the funny. Watch this space for a feature on this publisher early next year.

Mark Fainaru-Wada and Steve Fainaru's *League of Denial: The NFL, Concussions and the Battle for Truth* (Crown Archetype, 399 pages, \$32) is an unsparing exposure of one corporation's willingness to sacrifice its employees on the altar of profit. The section on Pittsburgh Steelers centre Mike Webster, a Hall of Famer reduced before his

death to sleeping in a bus station, will leave any sensitive reader suspended somewhere between horror and outrage. The implications of these formidable reporters' findings are in no way limited to football: change the names and they could just as easily be writing about hockey. Would you want your child to take up either sport? It's a question that hangs heavier with every passing year, and one that shouldn't be answered without the perspective that a book like *League of Denial* provides.

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