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BIBLIOASIS: A CASE STUDY OF A SMALL CANADIAN PRESS

By

Nikolina Blagić

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2022

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the precariousness of the Canadian literary marketplace while using Biblioasis' bookshop and press as a case study of small, indie presses in Canada. Biblioasis primarily publishes short stories and poetry, but they are also known for their International Translation Series, among other genres such as non-fiction. The press' location in the border city of Windsor, Ontario forces them to consider the American literary market in conjunction with Canada's literary scene. John Metcalf plays a critical role in the foundation of Biblioasis, bringing many ideas and authors from his former press, Porcupine's Quill. Economic and historical contexts for Biblioasis' enterprise are explored, explaining how the press and bookshop managed to survive the both the COVID-19 pandemic and the difficulties of the Canadian publishing business.

DEDICATION

This thesis is wholeheartedly dedicated to the following people:

My amazing family – Miro, Sanela, and Magdalena. Thank you for providing me with consistent financial assistance, moral support, and unconditional love. I am grateful for everything.

To Mario, with genuine gratitude and warmest regards: thank you for being a constant source of support and encouragement. I appreciate your patience and kindness.

A special dedication for Brandie – my sunshine, study buddy, and best friend. Thank you for always wagging your tail when I come home, for staying up late into the night with me while I am studying, and for making my life wonderful.

I love you all.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank Dr. Susan Holbrook of the Department of English at the University of Windsor and Dr. André Narbonne of the Department of English at the University of Windsor for supervising this thesis and dedicating time to help me whenever I needed it. Without their guidance, this paper would not have been written. They were always thoughtful, good-natured, and encouraging during the entire process. I am profoundly appreciative for both of you.

I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Suzanne Matheson of the Department of English at the University of Windsor for being my emotional support during tumultuous times.

Finally, I must thank Dr. Jeremy Worth of the Department of Languages, Literatures, & Cultures program at the University of Windsor for being the external reader for this thesis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
DEDICATION.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vi
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1 – HOW 2005 CAME TO BE.....	13
CHAPTER 2 – MYTHOLOGY OF THE PRESS.....	25
CHAPTER 3 – SHORT STORIES.....	53
CHAPTER 4 – ARTISTIC STATEMENTS VS. PUBLISHING COSTS.....	71
CHAPTER 5 – INTERVIEW WITH DAN WELLS.....	79
CONCLUSION.....	90
REFERENCES/BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	92
VITA AUCTORIS.....	98

INTRODUCTION

"I just parked the car on the side of the road; give me a minute to drop it off," he declares on the phone, crinkling a tan paper bag, the mass of a hardcover and paperback steady in hand. The running car engine vibrates while the Wilco album playing inside recedes in the distance, becoming a waning whisper with every step towards the residence. Windsor wind puffs like a cigar; a fabric shield across his mouth protects skin from the elements. His headlights swell in the darkness, cutting a beam across the river and shattered stars. Trees past the porch creak, an old man's bones reaching to grab a good book before retiring to sleep. After laying the brown bag on the wooden deck, his finger depresses the doorbell button – feet draw back, forming a safe and socially distant space. Dan Wells, bookseller, publisher, independent bookshop owner, stands before the weather-beaten Olde Walkerville house, hand-delivering online orders to his faithful customers.

Canadian publishing houses know the odds of going out of business are high, but many indie and small presses accept the risk, hoping to positively contribute to the ever-changing Canadian literary sphere. Biblioasis' consistently risky publications, excellent brand image, and positive track record of public reception ensure academic, international, and critical literary readership, with the press prioritizing the production of challenging works over financially profitable literature. Disappointing profit margins for Canadian literature means that Canadian literature competes with American book imports, and Canadian publishers sometimes do not consider publishing Canadian authors. Biblioasis' choice of authors runs the gamut from those seeking to publish their first book to established, commercially successful writers. In doing so, Biblioasis promotes and nurtures Canadian literary culture, rivaling the publications of titan

presses like HarperCollins Publishing, Penguin Random House, Simon & Schuster, Hachette, and Macmillan.

In matters of literary taste, Biblioasis found early guidance from John Metcalf, then the Senior Editor at Porcupine's Quill. When Metcalf arrived at Wells' newly conceived press, he brought with him years of experience in small-press publishing, and the arguments of a literary provocateur. Metcalf had emigrated from England forty years earlier, arriving at a time when literary nationalism, energized by a Centennial buzz which would last well into the 1970s, had become an important force in Canadian publishing. Metcalf satirized what he saw as intellectual complacency and the danger of government sponsorship of literary tastes, most notably in his book *Kicking Against the Pricks* (1982).

Fast forward to 2004, when Biblioasis prints its first catalogue, and the Canadian literary scene, like Metcalf himself, is transnational. Now his arguments for literary values that supersede notions of national identity are perhaps worthy of a shrug, although the values themselves are often controversial, belonging as they do to a dedicated outsider might be met with indifference nowadays. A *Quill & Quire* review of Metcalf's *An Aesthetic Underground* notes that "it's hard to refute his grim sketches of post-war England and Canada in the early 1960s, but Metcalf's snobbish tone and lack of empathy for everyone but those who share his calling overwhelms [*sic*] any sympathy for his views" (Grainger). The ethics of tilting at windmills – symbolized in Biblioasis' logo – will be open to public judgement when Biblioasis, through its critical organ, *Canadian Notes and Queries* and in conjunction with *The New Quarterly* publishes in 2008 an issue in response to the *Penguin Book of Canadian Short Stories* edited by Jane Urquhart.

To understand Metcalf's role at Biblioasis requires some economic and historical context, especially because his assault on literary nationalism ironically places him within a tradition of

Canadian criticism dating back at least as far as A.J.M. Smith's article, "Wanted – Canadian Criticism" (1928). Economic difficulties are responsible for some of Canlit's challenges, given that the vast majority of Canadian writers, especially poets, cannot make a living from their pens, and allowing that writers need to dedicate full-time hours to their craft for it to come to full fruition. Charles G. D. Roberts' lament, "The Poet is Bidden to Manhattan Island" (1886) decried the need to leave home to write about home as early as the Victorian period. As Nick Mount has documented in *When Canadian Literature Moved to New York*, many early canonical works of Canadian literature were written outside of the country, their authors unable to support themselves in Canada. Manifest in the 1921 founding of the Canadian Authors Association is a desire to stop the cultural brain drain to the United States. The intersection of nationalism and literature in the CAA marks their purpose: to nurture Canadian writers, not necessarily determine who they are based on their ethnicity or the subject matter in their writing. Nevertheless, the CAA is often the boogeyman of literary boosterism as it is in F.R. Scott's poem "The Canadian Authors Meet," self-published in the *McGill Fortnightly Review* in 1927.

From the earliest stirrings of Canadian literary criticism – by which I mean a criticism with standards outside of literary boosterism, regardless of what those standards are – the question that perplexed scholars was one of identity. In a country founded initially as a colonial enterprise, who was a Canadian? The issue is as relevant today as it was in 1943 when E.K. Brown's *On Canadian Poetry*, a seminal work of Canadian criticism, first saw the light of day. Brown's definition includes writers who were born in Canada and "passed a considerable number of their best creative years" there, as well as those who were born abroad but "once arrived in Canada did important creative work and led much of their literary life among us" (Brown). He acknowledges that Canadian literature exists, but "it has stirred little interest outside

of Canada,” a similar sentiment to what Metcalf expresses in *An Aesthetic Underground*. Notably, two books from the Edwardian Period, *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) by L. Maud Montgomery and *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912) by Stephen Leacock, captivated a huge international readership that continues today. Both were initially published outside of Canada.

Another issue for Canlit both historically and today is the vastness of its geography – Canada is too large to efficiently transport book orders from one side of the country to another. Canada’s most important publishing center is Toronto, so booksellers in Vancouver, Winnipeg, or Halifax need to consider whether it is worth ordering books that will be transported thousands of miles. Additionally, Brown points out that “nine out of ten Canadians live within two hundred miles of [the American border], more than half a hundred miles.” This means that American bestsellers or classics can be ordered by bookstores with confidence that they will sell, while experimental Canadian titles constitute a financial risk. If Canada’s population were less spread out and less regional in its literary tastes, “enclosing an area comparable with that of the region of New England,” Brown says that the problem might be solvable. Moreover, he goes on to underscore how Canada’s sense of cultural nationality is divided – French Canada has a distinct sense of culture that is stronger than English Canada’s, and French Canadians are “almost without curiosity about the literature and culture of English Canada.” It is more likely a French-Canadian book will be translated into English than the other way around. For instance, *Les Anciens Canadiens* (1863) by Philippe Aubert de Gaspé, has been translated into English three times as *The Canadians of Old* by Georgiana M Pennee (1864), Roberts (1890), and Jane Brierley (1998). Arguing in the modernist period, Brown stated that “to write in the English language is to incur the competition of the best authors of Britain and of the United States” and

that “it is obviously that the accident by which Canadians speak and read one of the main literary languages of the world is a reason why they are less likely to read native books than a Norwegian is, speaking and reading a language peculiar to his own country.” Since Canada’s main language is English, Canadian readers compare Canadian content with American and British texts as if they were equal.

Metcalf’s criticism of Canada’s colonial attitudes is in keeping with Brown’s of forty years earlier; both see Canlit as lesser than American and English works, the national literature in need of renewal. Brown argues that Canada did not adequately believe in itself, which he declares is the “most serious of all the many charges that French Canada” also “brings against us.” Brown believes that Canada is discontented with its imperialist literary scene; English Canadians do not want to completely detach from the past and “at heart [they do not] know whether Canada or the Empire [are their] supreme political value[s].” Great art emerges when artists and audiences share a common passion “in the kind of life that exists in the country where they live,” but in colonial or semi-colonial communities, artists and audiences are not interested in their immediate surroundings. Metcalf reiterates the same idea as Brown: that literature progresses with society.

Metcalf is displeased with what he considers a continuous cultural decline in the country, a view that he brought to Wells at Biblioasis’ inception. The upshot of their literary politics is that Biblioasis has critical standards and a publishing identity, promoting Canadian stories that multi-national publishers will not touch because of their low profit margins. Potential readers may not know an author’s name, but Wells and Metcalf want audiences to identify their press’ logo and know what to expect from their books. They are against short stories being viewed as workshops for future novelists. When Metcalf started working for Biblioasis, he brought authors

from *The Porcupine's Quill* with him, along with the strategies he learned from working at that press. The first *Biblioasis* catalogue reveals just how similar the *Porcupine's Quill* and *Biblioasis* are – out of the seven authors, two of them are *Porcupine's Quill* authors. Other notable *Biblioasis* writers that have titles published by *Porcupine's Quill* are Clark Blaise, C.H. Gervais (or Marty Gervais), Terry Griggs, David Helwig, Steven Henighan, Hugh Hood, Amanda Jernigan, Norman Levine, K.D. Miller, Eric Ormsby, P.K. Page, Leon Rooke, Patricia Robertson, Robyn Sarah, Russell Smith, Zachariah Wells, and of course, Metcalf.

During *Biblioasis'* earlier years, Metcalf was a substantial figure, but his editorial role became less prominent after the press established itself and took on new publishing challenges. Metcalf's theories are crucial for this research project because his editorship was foundational for the press. As a Canadian writer, teacher, anthologist, editor, and critic, Metcalf is a polarizing figure who was “once at the top of Canada's literary blacklist” (Lamey). Writing in 1989, Leon Rooke confesses that many writers turned down an opportunity to contribute their writing to a section in *The Second Macmillan Anthology* – an anthology Rooke and Metcalf co-edited – “out of firm disagreement with John Metcalf for his variety of stands on assorted issues related to art and society” (Lamey). Be that as it may, during the first ten years of *Biblioasis'* operations, Metcalf's role was significant. As early as 2006, the press expanded its operations to include an International Translation Series under the editorship of Steven Henighan. The speed at which *Bilioasis* made its mark on Canadian publishing further accelerated when Alexander MacLeod's short story collection *Light Lifting* became in 2010 a finalist for both the Giller Prize and the Frank O'Connor Award. What unifies the press now is diversity – a commitment to high literary standards enriched by inclusiveness.

Until 2005, Metcalf's role at Porcupine's Quill meant he was tuned in to the indie publishing scene. In *An Aesthetic Underground* he states his publishing manifesto, writing that "a press lives fully only when it creates a personality and mythology" (242). *Quill & Quire's* review of *An Aesthetic Underground* critiques Metcalf's method of criticism, stating that it is "based purely on the writer's words and how those words sound to the ear is often sophisticated and astute (if a little one-sided). His line readings of selected Canadian writers reveal what an excellent teacher Metcalf must have been when his heart was in it" (Grainger). Having examined the precarious nature of the Canadian literary marketplace and how Biblioasis developed its Metcalfian signature in the face of economic determinism, this thesis will discuss Biblioasis' place in the Canadian literary and publishing landscape. This includes how they have managed to survive the harrowing publishing industry in Canada, where they ushered in works by significant authors including Kathy Page's *Paradise and Elsewhere*, Paige Cooper's *Zolitude*, and Douglas Glover's *The Erotics of Restraint*.

Metcalf defines literature as "a living thing; it is the involvement of writers and readers, of publishers, printers, scholars, critics, reviewers, teachers, librarians, booksellers, book collectors, antiquarians, bibliographers, and historians, in the cherishing of language" (*An Aesthetic Underground* 373). Biblioasis publishes Canadian short stories, formal poetry, literary criticism, and commercial titles. Wells understands the book trading business; this is what Biblioasis does that Porcupine's Quill did not. Hiring permanent employees, as Wells does, changes the nature of a press. More staff means more overhead. Andrew Steeves, publisher of Gaspereau Press, observes in *Smoke Proofs* the indie publishers' "responsibility as cultural institutions" (66), and the struggle with financial determinism to produce quality books: "Even the most casual student of publishing quickly discovers that this trade shares at least one concern

with the broader manufacturing community: How much (or perhaps more accurately, how little) can be invested in the quality of a product without endangering profit?" (61). Furthermore, Wells needs to keep his employees for as long as possible, because constantly hiring anew is costly and time-consuming given that new staff require training. At the beginning, Biblioasis hand-sold Salvatore Ala's *Straight Razor*. That today they participate in a larger distributing and advertising network with sales in the United States militates against, but does not prevent, the press nurturing individual mythology.

Biblioasis' catalogue establishes its literary identity as a press primarily publishing Canadian short stories, international translations, formal poetry, and literary criticism. As previously stated, Biblioasis publishes a literary magazine on a triannual basis, *Canadian Notes & Queries*, while operating a bookstore on Wyandotte Street in Windsor, Ontario. Biblioasis' persona relies on individual outreach from those representing the enterprise. As an active member of the Windsor community, Wells works at the bookstore, the publishing house, and the magazine; the symbiotic relationship of the three business endeavors strengthens Biblioasis' good relationship with the public. His consistency and work ethic are representative of the brand's own ethos. This is what Wells does with Metcalf's vision, although Metcalf is no longer a major player. The more tasks the press takes on, the more outreach they have, and the more employees they need. In the final chapter of this thesis, Wells does an interview where he answers what happens if the press loses money, how employees are affected, and how government funding impacts what Biblioasis publishes.

The first chapter of this thesis looks at material facts: it explains the Canadian literary environment leading up to 2005, the year that Biblioasis began publishing books, and Biblioasis' present-day book publishing practices. Tara Murphy's historical thesis, "The Porcupine's Quill

and the Gaspereau Press: Studies in the History, Philosophy, and Production Values of Two English-Canadian Printer-Publishers," examines how the material book adds sociological and literary value to the text. Murphy argues that a material book is a cultural object and that "the sense that all aspects of production are meaningful has captured the imagination of Canadian printer-publishers since before the 1970s" (Murphy 10). Murphy's text chronicles the careers of various Canadian publishing houses, including Porcupine's Quill, which directly influenced the birth of Biblioasis and their philosophies. The aim of this thesis is to use Biblioasis as a case study of the tribulations independent Canadian presses face amid tumultuous times and of their willingness to adapt to new and uncertain environments, both literary and economic. The COVID-19 pandemic shapes the day-to-day routines of many small businesses, including Biblioasis' press and bookshop, forcing them to reconstruct the way they run their business.

An interview with Wells from Biblioasis explains how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted Biblioasis' profits, their relationships with their authors, and their ability to run their business; COVID-19 positively effects the bookstore because it forced Wells back into the bookstore's space. In "Biblioasis Virtual Chat," a pre-lockdown virtual interview via Facebook Live on April 1st, 2020, Wells asserted that Windsor's location as a border town forces the press to consider the American and international market, making the location crucial for their success. He says that "Windsor is integral to the success we have had . . . we are still close enough to major publishing centers in Toronto and New York that we can get there in a couple of hours. We are still far away enough to have some distance . . . we have to be in a similarly connected border community to do this . . . my business and staff can afford to live well on salaries that you couldn't live as well on in other cities" (Facebook 22:05). After Ontario announced in early 2020 that bookshops were among the businesses not considered essential, Wells had to close the

bookstore to comply with government mandates, including closing the border. However, a solution quickly emerged – the bookstore would locally deliver books to customers during the lockdown. Using social media allowed the bookstore to advertise their new service, proving that online marketing is a wise investment. Wells admits that what online presence the bookstore had was negligible and somewhat purposeless: "we had a website, but it didn't have any commerce aspect. So we got a commerce site set up, and we began doing home deliveries" ("This Windsor, Ont. Bookshop..." 1). The author of this thesis was hired to work for the bookstore a year into the pandemic, by which time both website and social media were supported and flourishing, and most kinks had been resolved. I nevertheless had the opportunity to experience some of the daily challenges that arise when navigating the uncharted waters of the pandemic and unpredictable government mandates – both of which could, without warning, impose sudden changes of direction.

The second chapter analyses the mythology of the press, including how Biblioasis market themselves, what they claim to stand for, and the political statements they make (for instance, through the books they put on display in the bookshop). Canadian transnational identities play a role in book marketing at Biblioasis; while today they publish a more racially diverse group of authors, including Ondjaki, Jorge Carrión, Andray Domise, Rinaldo Walcott, Sarmishta Subramanian, and Marilyn Dumont, most of the authors they published during their first few years of operation were White. *An Aesthetic Underground* provides much of the biographical material for this chapter as well as explaining the evolution of Canlit from the 1960s to the present from Metcalf's point of view. Included in this chapter is a transcribed interview with Pablo Strauss, translator of Stéphane Larue's *Le Plongeur*, explaining his experience working with Biblioasis. Biblioasis pride themselves on their short stories, but their International

Translation Series is equally as important to their legacy. These resources underscore how Biblioasis construct their mythology and personality.

The third chapter will establish Biblioasis' history and reputation as a short story publisher, considering the lack of profit in short story publishing. A widespread misconception is that short stories are exercises for writing future novels in Canadian literature, a problematic attitude to the short story genre which diminishes its complexity and importance. Alice Munro won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013 for her short stories and was the first Canadian woman to receive the honour. At the beginning, Biblioasis mostly published writers whom Metcalf brought with him from the Porcupine's Quill. The Metcalf-Rooke Award intended to bring new writers to Biblioasis' press was first awarded to Patricia Young, an already-established writer. Biblioasis spent a considerable amount of money on their first trade book, Ala's *Straight Razor*, which won The Alcuin Society Award for Excellence in Book Design. This section will focus on Biblioasis' history of publishing short stories with close readings of the following short story collections: Donald Winkler's translation of Samuel Archibald's *Arvida*, Page's *Paradise and Elsewhere*, and Macleod's *Light Lifting*.

The fourth chapter explores the limitations of artistic endeavors and publishing practices restrict creativity: how much deconstructing can Canadian publishing practices take for the sake of art? How much do finances impact an artistic vision? Most small presses in Canada start their careers by publishing poetry books they know will lose money. Isla McKetta's interview with Wells informs my discussion of his personal history, what led him to found Biblioasis. Amy Bobeda's essay, "Keeping the Bear Afloat: Lessons from Diane di Prima's Small Press Legacy," provides insight into the future of publishing in the digital age and the importance of crowdfunding for political and niche publications.

The fifth chapter chronicles my transcribed interview with Wells, where he answers professional and personal questions about the current state of the press, the purpose of the bookshop, and his artistic vision. Hearing from Biblioasis' founder firsthand reveals the press' passion for Canadian literature and desire to publish pristine Canlit. Although there have been some controversies in Biblioasis' past and casual mishaps, Wells and the staff at the press and bookshop strive for excellence. This concluding chapter allows Wells to speak with his own voice, giving him autonomy and the space to explain the importance of Biblioasis' publications in Canadian literature.

This project's focus on Biblioasis widens the contemporary discussion about small-press publishing and book marketing by considering all the unforeseen dilemmas the COVID-19 pandemic brought to small businesses. Even without discussing the pandemic, Biblioasis is a unique press because of its proximity to the United States/Canadian border – Wells must consider the American market and the American consumer in his everyday operations while upholding the press' "Canadian" identity.

CHAPTER I

HOW 2005 CAME TO BE

Canadian publishers primarily told British and American stories until the 1950s, when Macmillan, McClelland & Stewart, University of Toronto Press, and Oxford University Press started the English-Canadian modern-era publishing (MacSkimming 2). Before the 1950s, textbooks were the primary texts published in Canada, and trade paperbacks were trifling. The third chapter explores the role of literary awards in Canlit - Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* was the book that brought many readers to Canadian literature. After Ondaatje won the Booker Prize in 1992, Canadian literature established a more respectable reputation, attracting the attention of readers worldwide. MacSkimming quotes Ondaatje after *The English Patient* won the Governor General's Literary Award, stating that "writers don't just spring up out of the landscape, fully formed, ready to get honours. Canadian writing today evolves from a dedicated nurturing" (3). One way to nurture Canadian literature is to give writers space and resources to tell their stories. Producing books from Britain and the United States was cheaper because of economies of scale – "the bigger the printing, the lower the cost per copy" – forcing Canadian publishers to underprice their books to compete (4). It was perilous to publish new Canadian literature if the press's goal was to make money or at least not lose money in their investment. Literature documents history and culture, but the cost to preserve culture might be too high to pay for many publishers barely staying afloat. Presses publishing Canadian literature need to make money in order to pay their employees fair wages and to expand their financial resources, allowing them to allocate funds for riskier publications. Funding allows publishing houses to produce riskier publications that will not yield great sales: those books need to tell a non-commercial story.

Interestingly, most indie publishing houses started their catalogs by publishing poetry – a genre that is rarely commercially successful. They publish poetry to uphold culture and disseminate experiences that otherwise would not be accessible to their audiences. Poetry forces readers to think about language: familiar words are used in unfamiliar ways, deconstructing the linear storytelling most readers become accustomed to when reading novels. Presses cannot dismiss publishing poetry simply because it is difficult to sell and market. Canadian artisans and writers compete with American exports that appear more commercially desirable. Supporting local businesses (such as bookstores) brings money into the local economy, securing small indie presses. However, the Canadian publishing industry needs more permanent solutions for lack of funding, mainly from the Canadian government. To understand how Biblioasis was able to rise and stay prominent in Canadian publishing to this day, it is essential to discuss all the key events leading up to 2005.

Government funding has the power to save the publishing industry – the Canadian government invested over eight million dollars over three years in the early 2000s "to save the [publishing] industry from the excesses of its own trading practices" after the Chapters Inc. hearing (387). From 1994 to 1996, Chapters and Indigo began expanding, monopolizing brick and mortar bookselling, forcing many small presses and independent booksellers to close their doors or shrink in size (Murphy 29). Chapters had fully expanded into a mega-hub of books that no small business could compete with from 1997 to 2000. They allocated the funds for the physical distribution of books: the government wanted to see the publishing industry invest in new technologies that would make physical distribution more efficient and ensure that inventory would flow from the publishers to the booksellers of Canada. There would be a lower cost to return books, and the book industry would see a rise in profits (MacSkimming 387). Funding is

necessary to combat powerhouses like Amazon, who invaded the Canadian book distribution market in June 2002, despite objections from Chapters/Indigo and the Canadian Booksellers Association. By officially locating Amazon's online operations in Canada, they could evade foreign ownership policy, destroying many brick and mortar stores and all native booksellers (389), even though Amazon only entered the Canadian market digitally.

Federally and provincially, the government's fiscal deficits crippled publishers for years, leading to many protests since it led to less funding for public libraries and education (390). This lack of funding is disturbing since public libraries offer free literacy programs for people of all ages and backgrounds, and are resources for finances, history, science, and the arts. Most people have access to the internet, but they need access to free scholarly books and historical resources available in library archives. The Canadian government defunded scholarly interaction, equal access to resources, and a sense of community. Booksellers sold fewer books because of this cut in funding for education, and libraries and children's publishers produced fewer materials for kids. According to MacSkimming, parents and librarians formed an alliance called the Canadian Coalition for School Libraries in 2002 that aimed to increase book budgets and teacher-librarian positions; this allegiance is necessary for children's publishers forced to appeal to commercialized American audiences, in case they do not have business in Canada (390).

Marketing promotes books to a broader audience and currently relies on new and everchanging technologies; the book industry must adapt. In the early 2000s, radio stations seldom covered Canadian authors and books, but television programs invited many authors and publishers to their shows. The television shows dedicated to broadcasting books were "long-running programs such as TVOntario's *Imprint* and CBC's *Hot Type*" that were "joined in 2001 by the channel Book Television, produced by Daniel Richler, and such programs as *Fine Print*

on Rogers Cable” (391). Television appearances invite a large group of people into the literary world who otherwise may not even know about the author or their works. The audience also has the advantage of listening to the author talk about their own book in a raw and candid way, which humanizes the author, and builds trust and intimacy by establishing a parasocial relationship and potential long-term social media following. Despite all these benefits, publishers in the first years of the millennium believed that print media was better for marketing than having a digital presence, so they targeted readers through print media, even though the printing industry was declining in book coverage (391). Leslie Howsam sees the text as a material object and cultural transaction; she agrees that print culture prefers certain ephemeral forms, like newspapers (Howsam 5). Canadian presses in the 1970s saw print media as a colonial capitalist expansion but some print media was seen as an opportunity to share political statements (Murphy 18), which presented as a promotion for books with powerful political declarations representing the ideology of the press that published the texts. In the early to mid-2000s, publishers preferred to embrace the form they were accustomed to and were often afraid of embracing new technologies.

On the other hand, it does make sense that publishers should prefer to advertise in a familiar medium since this ensures that other readers will stumble across their books and authors instead of publishers taking a risk to air their campaigns on television where viewers are not necessarily readers. Although most publishers aspire to produce great cultural works, they need to consider books that will be commercially successful, which also helps the industry by making sure there is money circulating. MacSkimming suggests that the only way that Canadian publishers can continue to publish is if they have working capital – “English-language recipients of government funding receive on average only 6% of their revenues in grants and typically earn

no more than 2% of operating profit, governments must not only maintain existing funding but ensure that their programs keep pace with inflation," adding that equity investment tax credit and a federal ACP proposal would be ideal for creating an exit strategy for owner-managers close to retiring from the publishing industry. It would also entice human and financial capital (MacSkimming 391).

It is impossible to discuss Biblioasis's place in the Canadian publishing industry without outlining the presses that indirectly lead to its creation. Even if Biblioasis does not always prioritize book design for every book release, as Porcupine's Quill and Gaspereau Press do, they strategically consider when they need to spend more money on book design and materials. The history of Coach House Press, House of Anansi, Porcupine's Quill Press, and Gaspereau Press reveals their publishing philosophies and printing practices. Tim Inkster, co-owner of Porcupine's Quill, is a graphic designer working on book design and publishing at his artisanal publishing house. The house privileges book design and artistic qualities of the material book in form and content, aiming to recreate 19th-century letterpress books by printing the majority of their books on "a twenty-five inch Heidelberg KORD, folded, and then sewn into signatures on a 1905 model Smyth National Book sewing machine" ("The Porcupine's Quill" 1). As for whom they publish: new underrepresented Canadian authors whose voices are on the verge of oblivion find a home there (1). Books coming out of this press are very experimental; Inkster sees the material book as poetry itself and dislikes the view that books are just a space for typesetting words on a page (Murphy 7).

Linguistics, poetics, and book design are interrelated and impossible to compartmentalize for Gaspereau Press, Porcupine's Quill, and Coach House Press. Murphy's thesis suggests that Canadian literary criticism avoids the subject of material books and book production. This thesis

will also investigate how the Canadian literary sphere has not constructed the appropriate terminology to discuss the non-verbal elements of text and how Biblioasis responds to this concept. Jerome McGann in *The Textual Condition* states that all literary work operates through linguistic codes and bibliographical codes that book artists manipulate for different genres so that the pages are recognizable for the reader and that a text cannot be understood aesthetically or historically until the physical form is understood (8). Poetry produced by Porcupine's Quill revolutionized Canadian publishing by popularizing the importance of the material book and how it transcends its time and the poet who constructed the text. The material book is a living body that needs nurturing; it desires reproduction. A well-designed book should entice the reader to pick it up and experience a work of art on every page; it is a tactile and visual experience. Murphy claims that the printers should "know full well how books 'talk' through their physical bodies; every material choice they make, therefore, can (in the absence of obvious financial or production constraints) be read as 'saying' something quite deliberate" (9). The ultimate goal of book design should be to better the understanding of the text through tactility.

Biblioasis does not separate the bookseller, publisher, and printer during the process of printing books; Frank Davey argues that dividing the printer, publisher, and bookseller and establishing distinct progressive stages is the fruit of a capitalist production that confines the publishers to print books in a particular genre or series that limits their creativity in favour of recognizable brand identity (14). A publishing house would want to limit themselves by sticking to one genre or series to avoid selling and marketing each book they publish – if the public knows what kinds of books they release, it will lessen the financial burden of marketing. Many publishing houses pre-1965 needed funding from a more prominent publisher. Often, the larger publishers produced textbooks or educational materials. Davey says that most Canadian

publishing houses who publish poetry and fiction are enslaved by petty-commodity productions that are "small press runs of relatively expensive paperbacks to pre-defined markets" (15). The Royal Commission on Book Publishing noted that in 2007, American pre-defined markets are eleven times the size of Canadian pre-defined markets, which have a smaller buying potential, meaning that any work of original Canadian fiction or poetry is extremely risky – especially considering that only a fixed number of new titles can be absorbed into the market annually (15-16). There is very little room for error when it comes to publishing Canadian books: "publishers must get all of the fundamentals right," which include "the choice of manuscripts and cover designs and marketing strategies to that crucial decision, how many copies to print." Having control over all the different steps to publishing the book is necessary since "routine problems like non-delivering authors or computer breakdowns, or outright disasters like a distributor's bankruptcy or a bookstore chain's implosion" make "the margin of error [...] narrow" (MacSkimming 3-4). Successfully absorbing into the pre-defined Canadian market is only a small financial reward with a high risk that often is not worth the gamble. In 1971, the Royal Commission on Book Publishing was formed to investigate whether it was in the public's best financial interest to support Canadian publishing, considering that America bought out Canada's firms, Ryerson and Gage, that year (113). Smaller presses that solely publish literary works risk bankruptcy. Equally as concerning is that McClelland & Stewart, a publishing house that brands themselves as a big-name Canadian publisher wanted to sell their business to American interests in 1971 (Murphy 16). Small Canadian publishers uniquely preserve culture: they often set aside short-term financial rewards in favour of creating a beautiful artisanal material book, ensuring that the typography and process of creating the material work align with the philosophies of their

press's brand identity and the content of the text to capture a literary moment within a confined geographical location.

Coach House Press specializes in experimental poetry, combatting the commercialized American market. They started a revolution in publishing that privileges ideology over methodology. B.P. Nichol and Steve McCaffrey, authors from Coach House Press, said that they want to inspire “awareness of the page as a visual, tactile unit with its very own separate potential,” saying that the material book is no different from any other machine (20). The press outright rejected financial motivation for their publications in favour of “cultural capital” (20). The House of Anansi, on the other hand, opened its doors in 1966 around the same time as Coach House Press, but they focused on radical politics, opting for traditional book designs (21). In Canada, the 1960s were an important time of change for the publishing industry because it responded to the Vietnam War, the rise in birth rates, and the new economic prosperity of the period. In 1974, Inkster founded the Porcupine's Quill, where he used Coach House Press' production methods while aiming to replicate Anansi's editorial skills. Anansi strived to create a culture at the national level, while Porcupine's Quill had a more focused, detail-oriented approach that did not completely reject commerciality like Coach House Press. MacSkimming calls Porcupine's Quill “Canada's pre-eminent literary press” many times in *The Perilous Trade*: it is a national treasure. As small indie presses grew, they tried to define Canadian literature and how to publish it innovatively. Every new publishing house believed they would trailblaze and redefine Canadian culture, but financial restraints, not ambition or creativity, limited their aspirations. During the 1960s and 1970s, many presses shifted their focus to material conditions of publishing, while Anansi wanted to interject a Canadian voice on global issues. According to Murphy, the Porcupine's Quill did not establish themselves until the late 1980s to early 1990s;

they peaked during the 90s to mid-2000s, then lost their footing around 2003 (23). Together, Inkster and Metcalf agreed that Porcupine's Quill books needed to exemplify what the press stood for through the material text; the books published were not the cheaply made paperbacks other presses released - they were created to resist aging and wear (25). They ensured durability by using sewn binding rather than traditional glue that often relaxed with age, leading to pages falling out, and printing on acid-free paper so those pages would not yellow and crumble (25).

The press did print jobs for local businesses for extra cash. From 1976 to 1989, they only released two cookbooks (25), which are usually commercially successful for presses and are sometimes released when the press needs to make some money. Metcalf became the editor in 1989 and wanted Porcupine's Quill to have a clear and concise brand identity, believing that a publishing press needs a unique personality and mythology to succeed (*An Aesthetic Underground* 242). He owns the most extensive collection of Canadian short stories, which was a huge asset for the press because they could rival Oberon, a house with the best reputation for short stories in Canada (Murphy 27). Inevitably, the press ran into financial problems that threatened their productions in the 1990s. The government did not offer financial support: the government needed to see that there was increased profitability yearly, with proof of the press's growing presence in the publishing market, ultimately encouraging the businesses to "borrow substantially against the promised 'business funding' in order to 'kick start' expansive new sales programs . . . refusing to fund print runs smaller than 500 copies" (28). If a poetry book sells 500 copies, it is a bestseller, to put this into perspective. The suggested strategy was to market the artisanal and experimental literary works as bestseller paperbacks, which made no sense considering that popular commercialized authors will go to larger publishing houses that will offer them more money over a small Canadian press. Inkster had a great relationship with

independent booksellers that distributed his books by handselling them, allowing the texts to reach a broader audience. In 2005, he described independent bookshops as "small, educated, dedicated, well-informed, intelligently staffed" (29). Independent bookstores strengthen the local economy while supporting local writers. During the two years between 1994 and 1996, Chapters and Indigo negatively impacted many small bookstores and independent booksellers, like Amazon does once they enter the Canadian literary marketplace (29). When General Distribution Services went bankrupt in 2002, the small presses that managed to survive the former years of turmoil found themselves having to cease operations or barely hang on – Porcupine's Quill lost 65,000 dollars in inventory after the closure (29). Porcupine's Quill was dying, and they finally knew that the time was near. Metcalf and Inkster reduced operations at the press over five years, with Metcalf slowly transitioning to a new publishing house that was emerging amid the chaos – Biblioasis. Many authors from Porcupine's Quill followed Metcalf over to the new press. Inkster announced that he would close the press by 2007, and they would shift their business over to gift products, like P.K. Page's *A Brazilian Alphabet for the Younger Reader*, which came out in 2005 (29).

The late 1990s to mid-2000s pushed the limits of how much Canadian publishers could withstand – considering the limited funding and financial success they had had over the past few decades. Chapters' monopoly took 65% of English Canada's book trade. In 2000, they insisted that instead of the regular 45-48% wholesaler's discount that was standard for the industry, they would be demanding a 50% discount or more, on top of returning books in "unprecedented amounts-reaching a total of 50 to 60% of all sales in 2000, marking a doubling of the previous industry average-many houses, including the Porcupine's Quill, thought that their press might go out of business" (52). NAFTA and the Canadian dollar being stronger than U.S. dollar made the

American market even more desirable since imports were "easier and cheaper to come by," meaning that the companies who made their materials more appealing to the American market did much better than those presses, such as Coach House Press, that decided to maintain their vision. Gaspereau Press wanted to unite publishing and printing in quality and saw the material book as a cultural object. The philosophy of their press is expressed through the excellence of their physical books. Steeves said that "the physical aspects of a book—the design, the type, the materials, the binding" must show that the "form and function" are in balance (59); the content of a book must reflect the material form. The Gaspereau Press and the Porcupine's Quill wanted to figure out what the future of Canadian publishing would be, but unlike them, the Gaspereau Press "did not limit the question to aesthetics" (54). As previously referenced, Steeves's *Smoke Proofs* has a chapter titled, "Why We Accept Shoddy Books," explaining his publishing philosophy and the state of book design in Canada. In this essay, Steeves deconstructs the belief that those publishers least bound by economic considerations are more likely to care about book design rather than smaller publishers who may not be able to afford this luxury. As it turns out, multinational publishers know that if a book is attractive, it is easier to sell, "even if that beauty is only skin deep and fleeting" (Steeves 66). Consumers' expectations for the quality of affordable books are relatively low, so these publishers spend money on covers and jackets, which are immediately visible to consumers, rather than on "fundamentals like line-by-line quality of the typesetting, better paper or sewn bindings. In effect, they bedazzle and tart-up their books and this passes for quality" (66). Smaller literary presses think that cutting their design and production budget will help them survive, so they opt for poor paper, binding, and reproduction methods. Independent publishers are cutting corners to minimize losses, not to maximize profit. Steeves argues that small independent presses misunderstand the importance of book design –

good quality physical books have a better chance of surviving, so he thinks they are worth the investment. The problem with shoddy book designs and productions is a human one – consumers are so accustomed to poor quality that they do not notice the skin-deep beauty of a mass-produced Penguin Random House book that only offers a beautiful cover.

The bookshop and the publishing house are interconnected entities for Biblioasis – they have a symbiotic, mutualistic relationship, working together to put books into the world. They produce the books and have a brick-and-mortar hub selling and promoting them. Metcalf greatly inspired Wells to start Biblioasis' press. They consider themselves sellers of short stories, which is no surprise given that most of Porcupine's Quill writers wrote short stories. Biblioasis seems to be the continuation of a press that could not survive the economic disasters that occurred in Canadian publishing in the late 1990s to mid-2000s; Biblioasis is the next generation of Porcupine's Quill, continuing their legacy. Biblioasis is not revolutionary – they are not doing new things; they are doing already established things well. For instance, Metcalf is like a Noah figure, bringing the Old World into a new location. He takes what is successful from Porcupine's Quill and brings it to Biblioasis. Palimpsest, Cranberry Tree Press, Walkerville Times (although it is not a literary press, they focus on local history and are a publishing service), Black Moss Press, Zed Press, and of course – Biblioasis were in operation in 2005. Whenever Wells recalls the start of the bookshop or press, he describes it as "accidental" – as though anyone can enter such a lucrative industry without wandering through the graveyard of publishers that provide blueprints of what not to do if you want a press to survive the perilous Canadian publishing market.

CHAPTER II

MYTHOLOGY OF THE PRESS

Having a short story published in *The New Yorker* justifiably remains the epitome of success for short story writers, but the magazine seldom accepts non-established writers. It is exceedingly difficult for a short story writer to get a publishing house to publish their short stories, considering that readership for short fiction has declined over the years. Moreover, most literary magazines publish short fiction online rather than in print. The best chance for a writer to publish their short stories is if there are enough stories to create a collection for a book. Biblioasis is known for their short story collections, many of them going on to win prestigious literary awards, such as Pascale Quiviger's *If You Hear Me*, winning the 2020 Governor General's Literary Award in Translation, and Kristyn Dunnion's *Stoop City*, winning the 2021 Relit Award in the short fiction category. This chapter investigates how Biblioasis creates a Metcalfian personality and mythology and how short fiction and translation are integral to the press. A transcribed interview with Strauss, translator of the 44th First Novel Award winner, *The Dishwasher*, details how he came to be a translator for Biblioasis while explaining the importance of translation. Metcalf's *An Aesthetic Underground* chronicles his transition from the Porcupine's Quill to Biblioasis, where he brought his passion and expertise for the Canadian short story genre.

Among the things Biblioasis claims to stand for are diversity, beautifully crafted books, and support for local art. The Biblioasis bookshop website claims that their inventory is diverse and intersectional, listing their commercialized "current bestsellers" and the "classics, fabulous children's books, works by local authors, regional interest books, and antiquarian books" they sell at the shop ("About"). Situating themselves in the "historic Walkerville District in Windsor,

Ontario," the bookshop and press are marketed as the local keepers of regional history. Most authors Biblioasis have published are White and from Southwestern Ontario, university educated, and middle-aged; several writers on their list have previously published books with the press and continue to return with new manuscripts. Biblioasis publishes diverse authors from different cultural backgrounds: some of my favourite writers are Ondjaki, first appearing in the Spring 2008 catalogue and Horacio Castellanos Moya from the Fall 2009 catalogue. Other non-White authors featured in Biblioasis' Fall 2020 catalogue are Jorge Carrión, Andray Domise, Rinaldo Walcott, Sarmishta Subramanian, and Marilyn Dumont.

Canlit has been transnational ever since Ondaatje's *The English Patient* won the Man Booker Prize in 1992. Although Biblioasis books have not been widely translated into other languages, the press translates non-English books into English regularly in their International Translation Series. Biblioasis seeks to preserve Canadian literature and publishes English translations of foreign language books. Metcalf, who left the Porcupine's Quill as the Senior Editor the same year that Biblioasis was founded in 2005, influenced Biblioasis' ongoing internationalism. In 1993, when he still worked for Tim Inkster, he wanted to connect the Porcupine's Quill with another literary press in either America or England so that the two presses could promote each other's authors, hoping that the Porcupine's Quill "could have launches and reading tours for the Americans and that all this would lead to our literary worlds drawing closer together" (*An Aesthetic Underground* 288). Choosing England or the States as possible nations to partner with meant that Metcalf was targeting the two most important countries that publish English literature; Canada benefits more from this exchange than England or the States would in terms of broadening readership and gaining credentials for the books exchanged, because their literatures have more readers than readers of Canlit. Launches and reading tours are typically

seen as effective strategies to market a newly released book and sell copies. Metcalf believes that unless Canadian literature is valued elsewhere globally, Canada will not read its own Canlit (88), so Canadian presses need to consider American markets if they hope to sell books.

In 2007, Biblioasis translated Ryszard Kapuscinski's poetry collection, *I Wrote Stone*, from Polish to English for the International Translation Series. The General Editor of the International Translation Series was Stephen Henighan, a German immigrant who moved to Canada when he was five years old and translated books in Romanian, Portuguese, and Spanish. His mother is English, and his father is of Irish and Scottish descent; Henighan's parents lived in various countries until they settled in Ontario. As an academic and a Canadian novelist, Henighan's literary work encapsulates the immigrant experience and modern globalization that makes many people feel displaced between two cultures. He was a longlist finalist for the Best Translated Book Award twice: once in 2015 for translating Ondjaki's Portuguese book, *Granma Nineteen and the Soviet's Secret* (2014), and for another book by Ondjaki, *Transparent City* (2018) – a book that was also longlist finalist for the International Dublin Literary Award in 2020. He won the Potter Short Story Prize in 1981 and the McNally-Robinson Fiction Prize in 2004 for his fiction. He was a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award, the Canada Prize in the Humanities, a National Magazine Award, and a Western Magazine Award (“Bio: Stephen Henighan”).

Translating literature into more widely read languages, such as English, gives the work the best chance of survival. If a work is in English, there is a very high chance that it can be translated into almost every language – but if a book is written in Flemish, for instance, and needs to be translated into Mandarin, the likelihood of finding a translator who is fluent in both of those languages is much slimmer. It is easier to translate the Flemish book into English so that

the English version is available to be translated into other tongues, such as Mandarin. Books showcase the ideologies and traditions of the community the author comes from, so translating books allows more isolated people or readers from differing traditions to experience an international landscape and history. Although Biblioasis considers itself a short story press, their International Translation Series is significant. Their Fall 2020 catalogue states that "Biblioasis became the literary press best known for short story collections and translation."

Biblioasis' English translation of Stéphane Larue's *The Dishwasher* in 2019 exemplifies the press' passion for translation. Even though they had no prior working relationship, Biblioasis hired Strauss to translate *Le Plongeur* from French to English. Networking with another press is how Biblioasis came to Strauss. I was fortunate enough to interview Strauss over Skype in March of 2020 with my colleague; he shares what it was like translating for Biblioasis. (The interview transcription is provided after this section discussing Strauss' work.) *The Dishwasher's* protagonist, Stéphane, is a Québécois graphic design student battling a gambling addiction which tarnishes his relationships, academic progress, and sense of self. Desperately looking for a job, he works as a dishwasher in a prestigious Italian restaurant. Strauss worked as a dishwasher in his earlier years and has lived in Québec for over a decade; he translated nine Québec fiction novels into English at this moment of his career.

Strauss told us that it was natural for him to be a translator because he has lived in Québec and countries outside of Canada, including Spain; his family migrated to various countries. His grandfather settled in Germany, and his father lived in Chile. As a child, Strauss's parents moved to Spain for six months. Strauss's six-month Spanish schooling preludes his formal semantic education. Despite earning a Bachelor of Arts in Canadian Literature in 2001 from the University of Victoria and a Bachelor of Education at the University of British

Columbia in 2004, Strauss had no formal training as a translator when commencing that vocation. His linguistic aptitudes lead him to teach high school English at the beginning of his career. Strauss asked Le Quartanier to translate *Le Plongeur* into English, forming a fortuitous relationship with Biblioasis since the French publishers have a longstanding positive relationship with the Windsor press. Le Quartanier told Strauss that Biblioasis is the best press to publish their English-translated manuscript because they are not afraid of a long book, meaning that their main concern is not commercial. It was an unusual decision for Le Quartanier to hire Strauss as the translator, considering he had never worked for them, but his enthusiasm to transcribe a novel relating to his personal life secured him the position. Strauss says that he "did what any self-respecting translator does when drawn to a book by an irresistible force: [he] begged" (Strauss 42). Strauss washed dishes at restaurants in university, understanding *The Dishwasher's* kitchen slang and substance-abuse culture.

Henighan's formal editing process conflicted with Strauss's copy-editing methods. Henighan does not like track changes via Microsoft Word or other digital documentation but working virtually ensures that any changes to the original manuscript are traceable. Henighan prefers to print the manuscript, mark it with a pen, scan the document, and send it to Strauss, making the document "long and heavy" (Blagic). Track changes are an industry standard for editors; Henighan is in the minority of people who refuse to work virtually. A substantive and copy editor works on stylizing the text and correcting errors; numerous people collaborate in a publishing house to finalize the book. Although Henighan is "a bit old school," Strauss says he is "an excellent editor" whose methods are a "pain in the ass." After selling the rights for *Le Plongeur* to Biblioasis, Le Quartanier's unusual degree of involvement ensured tonal consistency between the editions. Le Quartanier designed the cover of *The Dishwasher* with Biblioasis and

helped market the book to English audiences. The marketing team makes the book attractive to buyers, while the publicity team excites booksellers, reviewers, and customers post-publication. If both teams succeed, the book endures, influencing and delighting readers for years.

A great cover leads to steady book sales over time: *The Dishwasher* should visually communicate *Le Plongeur's* message, spawning enthusiasm and insight. Confused customers will not buy – they should understand the book two seconds after seeing the cover. Biblioasis's final cover teases the novel's themes, uses vital compositional elements and principles of design, has a captivating focal point, a clear title, and a minimalistic design. According to the interview with Strauss, the final cover is a compromise because it "may not be the [cover] everyone loved, but it is the one most people did not hate." *The Dishwasher's* cover deviates from *Le Plongeur's* original cover. The original monochromatic image in the French version conveys the calamitous nature of the novel. The title is significantly larger than Larue's name, presumably because he was not an established writer during publication, so there was no need to emphasize the author's name. The title's heavy type weight, serif font, and the crisp white type colour emphasize *Le Plongeur*: the tentacles frame the title, and no other white shades are lighter on the cover. The delicate linework creates a poetic design for this edition.

The Dishwasher, in contrast, is "a classic book cover" that does not "[reveal] everything that will happen in the book." Larue's name and title are visually balanced and equally emphasized: the same font, type weight, and color. Larue's success with *Le Plongeur* means that his name is now an important asset. Interestingly, titles are generally in the upper third of the cover because natural eye movement starts at the upper left and moves down to the right. *The Dishwasher* places Larue's name within the upper third region. The book design team recognizes that author's name was more marketable than the title, so the team utilized the rule of thirds,

symmetry, texture, and patterns to add non-distracting features promoting eye movement, high and low angles, combining several compositional elements. It has one clear focal point – the author and the title. The focal point cannot be accidental, and it cannot compete with the secondary and tertiary focal points. The title remains persuasive, visible, and readable, bolstered by the visual components. Excessively convoluted covers seem overwrought, making Biblioasis's minimalistic design a contemporary and clean alternative.

For Strauss, *The Dishwasher* is the only translation for the title, *Le Plongeur*. It was an "obvious choice," despite the title being the "hardest thing to [decide]" in publishing. He had "friends who thought [*The Dishwasher*] was a terrible title – they thought people would think of a dishwashing machine" instead of a restaurant worker. In publishing, a book's publisher decides the title and cover design because they need to market the book to make money. Larue and Strauss worked on the interior, while Biblioasis created a cover, advertising the book like a billboard. Nik von Schulmann, a Goodreads reviewer, says that "the subject matter, locale and Canadian content kept me engaged. I can see this book not being for everyone but I find Kitchen drama fascinating" (von Schulmaan 1). Although professional book reviewers provide valuable insight from a literary perspective, the public perception of a new book is vital because the general reader will disseminate the book through word of mouth with a non-biased perspective which will draw more readers to the book in the long run. *Le Plongeur* "hit a huge audience of people who do not read literary fiction," elaborates Strauss (Blagic). Former restaurant workers and heavy metal fans were some of the target audiences. Strauss says that he had to "fight with Henighan to keep [the language] colloquial," avoiding intimidating diction and staying true to the kitchen slang of the original. He "wanted to give La Trattoria, the fictional restaurant in *The Dishwasher*, a similarly coherent lingo. Moreover, since the book's setting is in Montréal, there's

the added complication of English-and French-speakers working side by side" (Strauss 2). Publishing relies on networking; Strauss believes that Wells' past as a bookseller allows Biblioasis to market to their target audiences resourcefully because "Wells and his team can see immediately what titles are selling, and how customers are responding to a particular cover design or sales pitch" (Woods). Biblioasis's collaborative relationship with Le Quartanier allowed Strauss to translate Larue's *The Dishwasher* into English while maintaining the integrity of the original French version.

Transcribed Interview with Pablo Strauss

Why did you publish with Biblioasis?

I didn't make that decision. I was really excited about this book in French when it came out, partially because I was a dishwasher for many years. I wrote to the French publisher saying that I was really interested in translating it. The way it works is the French publishers meet with the English publishers and sell their rights to the book, and the English publishers do the same. There is a meeting once a year in Montréal where we all know each other now, so a lot of them will have a certain type of book and say, 'this is a good fit for Biblioasis.' So, I am trying to think of how I ended up with Biblioasis . . . I think it was just the French publishers figuring out that they were the best fit, partially because it is a long book and [Biblioasis] is not afraid to publish it. They also have a close relationship with the French language publisher. They did [another book] which did very well. I was not the one who reached out to Biblioasis.

Is that how it usually works – does the publisher reach out for translations?

It really, really varies. Usually the French publisher will sell it to the English publisher. Then, the English publisher will sell it to whoever they want. I kind of intercepted it because I was really

excited about a book about a dishwasher. The French publisher pushed to have me do it instead of another translator. It was my first translation for them, which is unusual. As translators, we have to be entrepreneurial. We play a role between the two publishers. Not to just translate the books but to make a recommendation. We are stuck in the middle: we have to advocate for the author; we have to push the author away when they want to make bad decisions. Often [the authors] think they know what will be better English, but they don't. We're right in the middle without a lot of power. It is very important to have good relationships with everyone in the presses.

Did you have a working relationship with Stéphane Larue during the publication?

I didn't know him before I translated *The Dishwasher*. This book was a huge hit in French. He was on tour for a whole year, non-stop. This is unusual for authors, especially writing in French. By the time this came out, he was sick of dealing with this book. A publisher protected him from doing anything. Until it was finished, he had nothing to do with anything. Then we went on to the editing process with Biblioasis. Then, he read the revised and translated version. We did a lot of Skyping – maybe twenty hours, going change by change. A lot of it was about slang. There are things only the author can know. It is valuable to have a good relationship with the author. You have to develop that relationship, so they trust you, and you have to know when to ask them questions.

How much authorship do you feel you have over the novel?

I always felt like it was [Stéphane Larue's] book. When you do a translation, the copyright is in your name. You deserve credit, but you do not want to be the one everyone is talking about. In

the book's review, you should mention the translator. It is not authorship. You feel like every sentence is yours, but the books is still the author's.

What is your creative and writing process? How do you structure the chaos? How do you prepare to write?

The first thing you ask for is a long, long time to do this. My process is a lot of drafts – people think it is one or two, but it is more like ten drafts. You have to do four or five drafts after you finish writing in French. A lot of that process has to happen after you have stopped looking at the French. Things will sound funny if it is in the French order. The second draft takes the longest because you are trying to fix the problems. At that point, it should start to be polished. By the fourth draft, I will have the editor look over it. I will have the editor from the publishing house go over it and sometimes I will hire another editor. The last draft I will do text to speech. Reading it on paper is another important step. Having a person read it is better, but it is not always possible. You hear mistakes you do not always see.

Can you elaborate on the formal editing process with Biblioasis?

Henighan is the editor at Biblioasis. He is a bit old school because he does not use track changes. He prints it out, edits it, then scans it. He is an excellent editor, but it is a pain in the ass with a document this long – the documents get heavy. He printed the whole thing out, printed in pen, sends it back, and I have to go through the changes. We did this before we went to the author. Most people in publishing work in track changes. This was one thing that was an exception. There is a copy editor at the end of the process to style things and find errors. You have the substantive editor and copy editor. One thing which is unusual is the degree to which the French

editors were involved. Usually you sell the rights to the book and allow them to do what they want with it. The French publishers were involved in choosing the cover. Every cover goes through different versions – often, it is a compromise. It may not be the one everyone loved, but it is the one most people did not hate. It is a strong departure from the original cover. Sometimes the translated edition's cover takes the same image as the original cover. The original [cover for *The Dishwasher*] is cool because it ties in the metal [music] aspect. [The English cover] is a classic book cover – they aren't showing you everything that will happen in the book.

When it comes to the title, how much freedom does the translator have to alter it from the direct translation?

To me it was an obvious choice to keep the title as *The Dishwasher*. There was a lot of discussion, though. I had friends who thought it was a terrible title – they thought people would think of a dishwashing machine. Titles are the hardest thing to choose. You have to do it at the beginning of the process because they have to start marketing the book before it is done. If there is an obvious choice, I stick to it. I don't make the final decisions, that is the publisher. I've never heard of another title that I liked better [for this novel]. I think someone suggested *Dish Bitch*, which is new slang which has emerged recently for a dishwasher. I do not like it. I always fought for *The Dishwasher*. What I learned is that you want a short title. This book connected to a lot of people who have worked in kitchens, which is partially the reason it is widely read. I wanted to keep that kitchen-connection.

What would you say is the target audience and how did you keep this demographic in mind when translating?

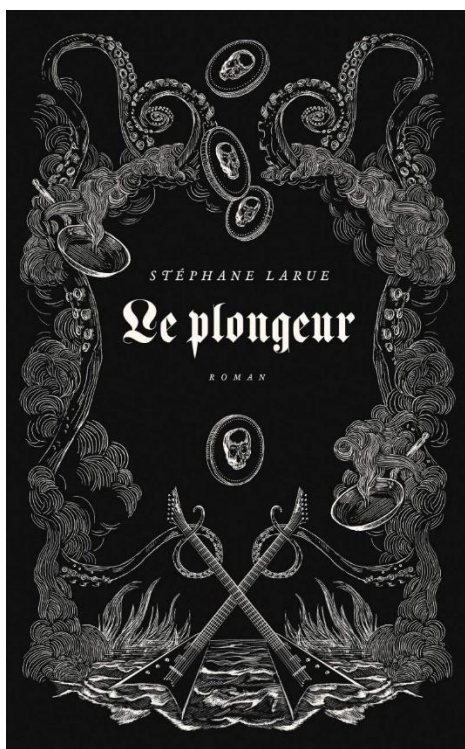
In French, that is what is interesting: it hit a huge audience of people who do not read literary fiction. People who love metal, former restaurant workers, etc. It hits a lot of non-traditional audiences and traditional audiences. In terms of thinking of the target audience in English, that is more the publisher's job on how they market it and how they design the cover. For me, I had to fight to keep it colloquial and I had to fight with Stephen Henighan to keep it colloquial.

Biblioasis uses a network of personal relationships to put their books into the world. They often get book sellers to write their blurbs. As a translator, it is better to work with more than one publishing house. If you really want to find books that fit with your own experiences and interests, you need relationships with different publishers. Publishing is a relationship business. People move around; it is not just a relationship with the company, it is a relationship with the individual people. Make sure to get things ready on time and do not be super difficult about changes – once in a while, you fight for something you believe in. You have to leave it to the professionals who know better than you. There are a lot of similarities in translators and editors – they do a lot and aren't really noticed. Every book has an editor and a lot of the best books have the same editor. They work in the shadows. Biblioasis is an amazing house. They're growing and getting better – the fact that Dan [Wells] was a book seller helps because they do not have an ivory-tower attitude. I am editing a book where the author references Québec figureheads by their first names. The issue is that someone reading this in British Columbia will not understand who this person is. Québec is a tight-knit community. There needs to be a last name [for readers outside of the region]. An English book for an English audience needs to be edited for them and in a way that will resonate best with that demographic.

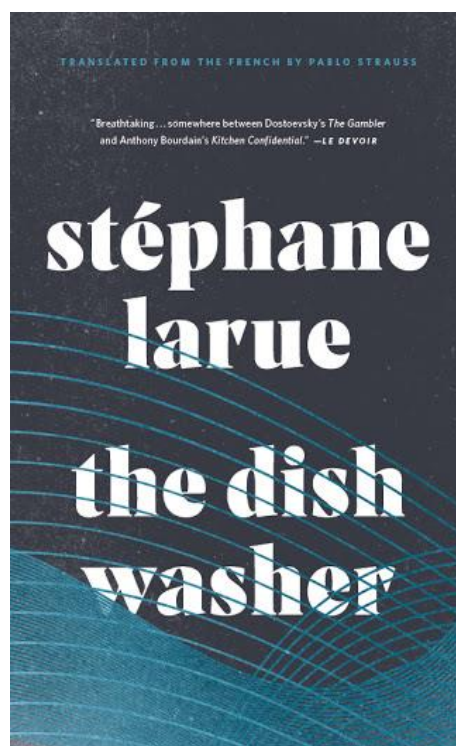
How has the book changed you?

With every book, you learn from the process. I think [*The Dishwasher*] really makes people reconnect with younger versions of themselves. For Stéphane, writing the book did that. He told me so. It took him back to being that younger person. It is a powerful thing – it is such an intense time in your life. I don't know if it changed me that much, but in terms of my own career, I feel more qualified to stand up to editors when it is worthwhile, and I will listen to their experience too. Translators get paid by the word so having a book that thick . . . it gives you an opportunity to go to work and do the same thing. Often, translators constantly change tasks. The ability to focus and concentrate helps. In the days of the typewriter, people had that [luxury of concentration] more often. By the end you're fed up with [the book and the editing] because it takes a lot out of you. Biblioasis really respects the book. Integrity will win in the end.

The Original Book Cover



The Translated Book Cover



The interconnectedness of Biblioasis' bookshop and press reveals to the public what they stand for: they display their books and the books they support in the bookshop window and front-facing display shelves, along with promoting books on their websites. Biblioasis' press website features their publication of *The Least We Can Do* by Josh Cook, subtitled *White Supremacy, Free Speech, and Independent Bookstores*, adding that this text is "in celebration of Independent Bookstore Day 2021." Cook's pamphlet has been on display at the bookshop next to the cash register for months; it is a publication Biblioasis believes represents their ideologies. They assert that the bookstore and press are against White supremacy and stand with POC men and women when they put a work like Cook's next to the cash register where all the customers purchasing books are guaranteed to see it. In the pamphlet, Cook asserts that the books on display in a bookstore show "what ideas we want to give space to" and "what people we want to be a revenue stream for" as booksellers (Cook 6). Once someone has published a book, they establish a sense of authority, meaning that people will be more likely to listen to the author's ideas; a bookstore validates an author's ideas by selling their book and by displaying it like an advertisement for their bookstore's political stances.

Wells has a history with politicized texts; the Fall 2020 Biblioasis catalogue states that "when Biblioasis founder Dan Wells first started thinking about publishing books of his own, it was the eighteenth-century political pamphlet that inspired him. Popularized during the Restoration, the tradition of pamphleteering—the publication of inexpensive booklets grappling with issues of current interest—has shaped the world in innumerable ways" (Biblioasis). *The Least We Can Do* is a political pamphlet about independent bookshops and how to fight White supremacy by carefully selecting which books are displayed and deciding how racist books need to be treated. What a publisher publishes reveals what they support. Cook argues throughout the

pamphlet that booksellers most likely will not suffer any negative social, economic, or moral consequences if they sell books by racists, misogynists, or fascist authors, but there is a moral and ethical constituent in bookselling that should not be ignored; booksellers are afraid that "people would be so afraid of saying something that could be considered a violation of the code of conduct that free speech would be curtailed. Booksellers would choose to remain silent, rather than risk whatever punishments were in the code" (Cook 11). *The Least We Can Do* references Karl Popper's Paradox of Tolerance, which states that "if you allow every voice into a space, with no moderation, eventually intolerant voices will make it an intolerant space" (20). At the most basic level, Cook is highlighting the antiquated argument that people on the internet also use to "stand up for their freedom of speech" – that censoring political statements should never be allowed because it is a human rights violation. If a political statement takes away rights from a large group of people and incites violent behaviours, it needs censoring to protect the rights of the many. Giving every political book a voice forces publishers and bookstores to amplify political views they may not necessarily agree with; since a press needs to have a mythology and a personality to survive, according to Metcalf, this coercion to accept every political worldview suppresses any individualism the press wants to establish.

Biblioasis' Fall 2020 catalogue clearly states their stance on political publishing: "we believe responsive publishing—direct engagement with the pressing issues of our time—a foundational aspect of responsible publishing" (Biblioasis 4). In 2020, the Black Lives Matter and Anti-Racism movements demanded to be heard and received much political attention. Simply being "not racist" was not enough anymore; people must be vocally anti-racist to fight systemic racism. People want to know how they can be anti-racist. One way is to admit that

White culture is privileged over non-White cultures and to deconstruct those traditions. In 2020, Biblioasis set *The Least We Can Do* front and center at the bookshop.

Jeanine Cummins's *American Dirt* is generally seen as a racist book because it culturally appropriates Mexican culture while fetishizing it. Cummins is a White author telling a story about Mexican migration for a White audience to remind them that Mexicans are human beings. Since display spaces in bookshops are finite, Cook underscores how Porter Square Books had to figure out how to deal with Cummin's book once it was published. Cook asserts that when a bookshop puts a book on display, they tell customers that the book has value and that they support the author and publisher making money from their bookshop. The bookseller then values the money they will make from potential sales more than the objective dangers of the book. He goes on to say that "as part of those conversations around displaying *American Dirt*, I heard it argued that choosing not to display the book in all of the displays it might fit in 'stifled' the free speech of the author. Displays are not an expression of accessibility but of amplification" (33). A display broadens the reach of potential buyers because bookstores are platforms; "a bookstore without curation isn't a bookstore, it's a warehouse" (34). Although bookstores and independent publishers will not change the world by removing racism and injustice simply by filtering out the content they carry, all the small changes will add up and still make a positive difference and show customers that their space is inclusive and safe. Porter House Books said that they "included a bookmark in every copy [of *American Dirt*] in the store that highlighted books by Mexican and Mexican-American authors...bookmarks highlighting books by trans authors to display with JK Rowling's books" (41). Booksellers and publishers have a social duty to curate the texts they offer to potential buyers representing what their establishment stands for politically, socially, and ethically.

The Biblioasis windmill logo is proudly stamped on the front and back cover of *The Least We Can Do* so that anyone who picks up the book will know it is from Biblioasis' press. The very last page of the pamphlet features the dedication and copyright information, along with a significant acknowledgment: it says, "Readied for the press by Daniel Wells." Wells is the face of Biblioasis, meaning that he approves of this publication and has studied every word of the text. On the Biblioasis press website, there is a large banner advertising the bookshop, saying, "Looking for Biblioasis Bookshop? Click here to visit our Wyandotte street bookstore's website and online store!" showing how tied the press and bookstore are for Biblioasis. In the "About" section, there is a photograph of Wells in what appears to be a book signing, reading to an audience. Wells is the spokesman and face that represents Biblioasis, so having his personal approval for a book means that it represents the personality of the press; Wells' political ideologies are the ideologies of the press. In this case, the creator cannot be separated from his creation.

Metcalf inspired Wells to open the press and worked as the Fiction Editor soon after the press opening. Metcalf himself says to look at catalogues – "always read catalogues," because "catalogues are where all the knowledge sifts down to" (*An Aesthetic Underground* 24). To understand Biblioasis' history, it is essential to trace Metcalf's literary contributions to Canlit and how he came to work at Biblioasis. From early on, he asserts that when he moved to Canada from England in 1962, there was no literary community he aspired to join here, saying that "the country lacked what would be called today an 'infrastructure' – the literary equivalent of roads, sewers, electric power, railroad tracks – and I've spent nearly all my life in Canada editing, writing, anthologizing, publishing, exhorting, teaching, and collecting in a probably vain attempt to help put the necessary infrastructure into place" (59). Throughout the memoir, Metcalf says

that Canada has been going through a cultural decline, highlighting issues in the public school system and the lack of good Canadian literature taught in the curriculums.

In 1966, Earle Toppings, senior editor at the Ryerson Press, was publishing an anthology of Canadian story writers and wanted two of Metcalf's stories; this is the fourth time that Canadian short stories were anthologized since Raymond Knister's *Canadian Short Stories* in 1928 (71). Metcalf connects his literary and creative life with collecting – he is piecing together history by acquiring Canadian short stories that deconstruct the metanarrative of Canlit. He says that history fascinated him (7) and that "collecting is intimately connected with writing. With mine, certainly" (12). Collecting seems to bring him a feeling of belonging to something bigger than himself – a community of good Canadian writers. Metcalf is an archivist of Canadian culture. Alice Munro, Marvis Gallant, Clark Blaise, and Norman Levine are the best short story writers in Canada, according to Metcalf (85). Munro and Gallant are two writers esteemed highly in Canadian literature, but Blaise and Levine are seldom discussed in this discourse and are often ignored in Canada; they were both published by The Porcupine's Quill and brought to Biblioasis by Metcalf. The stellar reviews Levine received – "... passionately and brilliantly rendered' (*New Statesman*), '...masterly...'*(Times Literary Supplement)*, 'Impressive and fascinating...'*(Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung)*, 'timeless elegance...'*(The Times)*, 'Norman Levine is one of the most outstanding short story writers working in English today' (*Encounter*)," along with being nominally published in America, seemingly does not matter to Canadians because they still refuse to read his work (87). On the other hand, Blaise published in American smaller publishing houses that treated him "as a 'mid-list' writer" and did very little to promote his work (87). Metcalf thinks that Canadian readers do not want to read Canadian texts unless American readers validate them. Levine received praised in Europe and Britain but not in Canada, and Metcalf

avers that this is because Canadians crave American praise and subscribe to the idea of America's particular authority to endorse literature. Moreover, he believes that Munro and Gallant are successful while Blaise and Levine remain obscure because Munro and Gallant are widely published in America and, more specifically, in *The New Yorker* (87-88). Munro and Gallant's work would most likely not be praised as highly if not for American recognition. Metcalf's attitude seems colonial and outdated – consider a rhetorical question: how many readers are sophisticated enough to share his literary tastes? Although Metcalf's arguments are provocative and alluring, they are not pioneering or positive. Despite its literary qualities, Levine and Blaise's writing may simply fail to catch the public's interest. Blaise's *The Meagre Tarmac* may indeed be a great literary work, but perhaps one whose title seems too passé to attract readers.

Metcalf brings a clan of Canadian writers with him whenever he starts working at a new publishing house. He switched from publishing *The Lady Who Stole Furniture* with Clarke Irwin to "the Canadian publisher," McClelland and Stewart, for *Going Down Slow* in the early seventies, when his book was well-reviewed but still managed to disappear (127). Jack McClelland did not leave a good impression on Metcalf because he was primarily interested in Mordecai Richler and Farley Mowat, writers of his age, and did not care about the future direction of Metcalf's career or his work-in-progress (127). This negative experience led Metcalf to reconsider his role as an editor, becoming more of a mentor than just a distant critic for emerging writers at the Porcupine's Quill and Oberon Press. Oberon Press attracted Metcalf because of the "intimacy and the energy [of the press]" (128). David Helwig is another author Metcalf worked with at Oberon Press, the Porcupine's Quill, and Biblioasis. Helwig edited two Oberon anthologies of short stories – *Fourteen Stories High* in 1971 and *New Canadian Stories*

in 1972 (139), hoping they would be a creative outlet for emerging Canadian writers, but Metcalf thought that most of the work submitted was "atrocious" (130). All this led him to beg colleagues for unpublished stories, only to realize that he was getting terrible texts because Oberon "could not afford to match the payments offered by some of the magazines, nominal though such payments were. An entire genre in Canadian literature was shaped by the fact that some publications paid as much as a hundred dollars for a story, others far less, or nothing" (139-40). Setting his sights on Blaise, Metcalf reached out to him because he "lived and breathed [short fiction]" as he did (130). Leon Rooke, another Biblioasis author, became the co-editor after Blaise because he has "an almost encyclopedic knowledge of the short story" (144). To Metcalf, collecting is integral to his practice as a writer and editor. Collecting short fiction builds a foundational Canadian literary infrastructure, allowing the reader to become a historian and see the patterns and mistakes of the literary tradition.

Although Metcalf fights for the integrity of Canadian literature, there is no question that some Canlit critics think that his self-righteous attitude and anti-academic beliefs poorly represent Canadian literary criticism. In 2008, *Canadian Notes & Queries* and *The New Quarterly* joined forces to select twenty short story writers left out of *The Penguin Book of Canadian Short Stories* that Jane Urquhart edited. Both magazines called their issues, "The Salon Des Refusés," translating to "the exhibition of rejects," which references a French exhibition in 1863 where the rejected artists of a juried Paris Salon came together to create their own art show. *Canadian Notes & Queries* and *The New Quarterly*'s goals were to showcase the forgotten talent in Canlit and to undermine Urquhart's selections. As one of the six largest publishing houses, Metcalf and Wells argued that Penguin's very name suggests authority and

credibility and that the publishing giant constructed a warped version of Canadian short stories to the rest of the world that excluded Canada's best short story writers.

The *Salon Des Refusés* opens with an introduction from Wells titled "Tweaking the Beak." In the third paragraph, he says that Urquhart's picks looked promising at first, with Leon Rooke, Caroline Adderson, Timothy Taylor, and Michael Winter listed. However, he goes on to question why Terry Griggs, John Metcalf, Elizabeth Harvor, Douglas Glover, Marc Anthony Jarman, Diane Schoemperlen, Clark Blaise, Steven Heighton, Sharon English, Norman Levine, Cynthia Flood, Ray Smith, Patricia Robertson, Libby Creelman, Mike Barnes, Susan Kerslake, and Hugh Hood are not a part of this anthology. Only four out of the seventeen Wells listed were not published by Biblioasis (Elizabeth Harvor, Libby Creelman, Susan Kerslake, and Marc Anthony Jarman – but *Best Canadian Short Stories* in 2017 and 2018 featured Jarman's stories), which seems slightly biased. The less-than-subtle implication is that Biblioasis short story writers are the best in Canada: an idea which would be problematic for most critics and readers, although all those writers are anthologized.

A question both Metcalf and Wells pose is whether Urquhart is qualified to be the editor of a short story anthology: Wells remarks that "some are only really known to aficionados and student of the short story form . . . one would hope that the editor of a canon-making anthology such as *The Penguin Book of Canadian Short Stories* would be both, if not a highly-skilled practitioner in her own right" ("Tweaking the Beak" 3). Urquhart is a novelist rather than short story author, which is an issue that Metcalf echoes in "Thinking About Penguins," his response to the anthology following Wells' Introduction. He opens his piece with examples of great editors Penguin selected for previous anthologies. For instance, he praises Colm Tóibín, who was the editor for *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction*, as a "fine stylist...[and] author of novels" with

the *Times* (U.K.) esteeming him as a “leading figure of European literature” (“Thinking About Penguins” 5). Richard Ford and Malcolm Bradbury are two other “highly respected novelists and short story writer[s]” that “Penguin and Viking Penguin entrusted comparably huge anthologies of American short fiction and short British fiction,” with Bradbury influencing a legacy of writers like Ian McEwan and Kazuo Ishiguro (5). Metcalf suggests that Penguin chose Urquhart since she is a “celebrity” (5), drawing more fans to the anthology than someone like Norman Levine, who has not reached mainstream popularity. The *Salon Des Refusés* uses Urquhart’s own word from the *Introduction* against her: she confesses “to uncertainty about being the person best suited to the task of selection simply because ‘...when it came to the younger and newer writers in Canada, it was most often their novels I turned to...’” (5). Her focus on novels and novelists, as well as her lack of short stories, troubles Metcalf and Wells.

Both critics condemn the definition of short stories extending to excerpts of memoirs and sections of novels. Wells explicitly points out this problem with the anthology: “Memoir excerpts? Bits from novels? What exactly is going on here?” (“Tweaking the Beak” 3). I agree with them here – chapters from novels and memoir passages are not short stories. Sometimes chapters from novels become short stories, but short stories should be a separate genre. Additionally, Urquhart says that she wanted to “open up and make more interesting the definition of the short story,” then goes on to say as she continued to read more of the genre that she realized “the Canadian short story is more than sufficiently interesting on its own” (3). The implication is that she did not see the short story form as significant or worthy when she began this venture. Wells believes that she did not fully understand “what a short story *is*” because she has a novelist’s sensibility that sees “these stories as belonging to ‘the pre-novel fictional worlds’” (3). An unfortunate but increasingly common view of the short story genre being

practice for young writers aspiring to write novels in the future devalues the genre, making it seem unsophisticated. “Tweaking the Beak” concludes by explaining why they choose the writers featured in their magazine issue – they want the reader to be “compelled to go searching for more of the same, digging up copies of Griggs’ *Quickening* or Smith’s *Century* or Mike Barnes’ *Contrary Angel*” (4). If readers search for similar authors, it means that they will go through Biblioasis’ other catalogues, generating sales. Amusingly, all these writers are Biblioasis writers. This statement is followed up with a condescending remark – if the reader is not compelled to search for similar writing to Griggs, Smith, Barnes, then “your case is hopeless: there’s nothing else we can do for you” (4). Wells does address the bias in recommending Biblioasis writers in the last paragraph, where he admits that he excluded Lorna Jackson and Kathleen Winter “because they were Biblioasis’ own.” However, he still decided to disproportionately include his press’ writers as Canada’s best. Metcalf asserts his principal opposition to Urquhart’s editing “is that she seems to have little idea of comparative *weight*” because Virgil Burnette is represented while Levine is excluded. Adrienne Clarkson is represented but Blaise is ignored. Lucy Maud Montgomery is represented while omitting the works of Hood (“Thinking About Penguins” 7).

André Alexis discusses the decline in Canadian literary-critical culture; using the *Toronto Star* as an example, he says their book section “is small, ineptly edited, and not worth reading” then clarifies that “when I say ineptly edited, I mean that the current book editor [Deborah Dundas], in allowing personal attacks” (Alexis). Metcalf and Wells use the Salon Des Refusés to project personal issues onto Urquhart. Skilled editors and critics encourage discussion and exchange ideas in the literary community, “allowing a community to participate in the evolution of the work.” Alexis pinpoints the problem in the Salon Des Refusés when he discusses failed

book reviews, saying that “a reviewer who fails to appreciate or understand a book tends to blame the book or the writer. And, in fact, it may well be that the book is ineptly done or that the writer is at fault. But the readers are generally blind to their own deficiencies, and reviewers even more so.” Urquhart’s supposed personal “ineptitude” was highlighted, along with what Metcalf called her limited reading abilities. While critiquing her as an editor for a short story anthology is fair, it turned into challenging her reading ability and comprehension skills.

Alexis accuses Metcalf of writing “shallow, self-aggrandizing rhetoric that now passes for criticism” while saying that “if I had to blame one Canadian writer for the state of affairs, I’d blame novelist and critic John Metcalf.” Metcalf is a known anti-academic who kicks off “academic” criticism in the 1980s with *Kicking Against the Pricks*, a collection of essays and what Alexis considers his best book. However, he scrutinizes Metcalf’s critical style further by pointing out that Metcalf seems to have a “shaky premise,” making it seem like distinguishing between “good” and “bad” writing is simple without explaining what the rules for good writing are for him. Criticism Metcalf provides is taking “sentences or paragraphs that he considers examples of brilliant writing and then does the written equivalent of...saying ‘There, you see?’ Having spent so much time arguing against the ‘academic, there really isn’t much more that Metcalf can do.” Worst of all, Alexis points out that in *An Aesthetic Underground*, Metcalf compares reading literature and wine tasting, praising his refined palate while implying that a reader of good taste can distinguish a good book “after a page or two.” In prose works (like novels), there is a lot more room for sections of weaker diction, punctuation, and poetics than in poetry where every word matters. Reducing “novels and stories to one of their elements and then insisting that the element, style in this case, is the only legitimate one for critical consideration” is a bad critical practice. *Quill & Quire*’s review of *An Aesthetic Underground* criticizes Metcalf

for constantly complaining about how he is underappreciated in Canada: "Not content with letting his deeds and convictions speak for him, Metcalf tirelessly champions himself as a voice of aesthetic righteousness in the uncomprehending Canadian cultural wilderness" (Grainger). Concluding his article, Alexis says that Metcalf does not defend his opinions because he does not think he needs to defend them – his opinion is *the* criticism.

While Metcalf and Wells make some significant critiques about Urquhart's selection of writers and her lack of qualification to anthologize short stories, they are both unnecessarily harsh in their criticisms, which often become personal attacks. Metcalf uses inflammatory language when he states: "how anyone could mistake [Michael] Winter's burnished fiction for 'memoir' is disturbing," then says that "Urquhart seems profoundly confused about fiction and non-fiction" ("Thinking About Penguins" 6). Questioning whether Urquhart knows the difference between fiction and non-fiction is insulting when she is an internationally acclaimed author. Prizes she has won or in which she was listed include France's *Prix du Meilleur livre étranger*, the Dublin Award, the Man Booker Prize, the Commonwealth Prize, the Giller Prize, the Governor General's Award, the Trillium Award, and the Rogers Communications Writers' Trust Fiction Prize. Her work has been translated into numerous languages. She is a Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in France and is an Officer of the Order of Canada. It is hard to conceive of an author of Urquhart's stature being "profoundly confused about fiction and non-fiction" or anything else literary. The Salon Des Refusés is the blueprint of how not to write literary criticism; any insightfulness is overshadowed by grandiose claims and hyperbolic sentiments that become misogynistic and spiteful at times. Metcalf and Wells question Urquhart's education, implying that she is not well-read. Wells wonders, "did Jane Urquhart read the stories of Blaise, Griggs, Heighton, Metcalf, Mukherjee, the Smith(s) and find them wanting?"

Did she read them at all?” (3). Metcalf’s casual narcissism is a more extensive matter in all his literary work and is not limited to this Salon Des Refusés mishap. It is not a way to build community among writers and readers and advance thinking and discourse on Canlit issues. Urquhart may not have been the right choice for an anthology of short stories since she is not known as a short story writer – she is either a novelist who seems to have an unstable definition of what she considers a short story or she was willing to experiment, as she does in her own writing, and Metcalf and Wells rejected her experiment because she did not promote their authors. Including memoirs is a stretch, but excerpts from novels, if they can stand alone, to me can be considered short stories. Biblioasis included a chapter from a forthcoming novel in *Best Canadian Stories 2019* – a portion of Alex Pugsley’s *Aubrey McKee* (2020) titled “Wheelers.” Notably, Metcalf and Wells did not select “Wheelers” for *Best Canadian Stories 2019* – the editor, Caroline Adderson, did. However, they are responsible because they allowed her to add it to the short story collection. Is this hypocritical? The Salon Des Refusés attacks Urquhart for publishing a short story from an important, canonical writer, Michael Ondaatje; not only is the writer canonical but so is the text. *Running in the Family* is taught in universities as an important work of Canadian transnationalism. Although Pugsley’s short story was published and written before *Aubrey McKee*, Biblioasis was aware that it would be a larger body of work – a chapter in a novel, the very thing Metcalf and Wells criticized Urquhart for including in the *Penguin Book of Canadian Short Stories* eleven years prior. The original short story evolved into a more considerable work, but Metcalf and Wells’ logic suggests it is no longer qualified as a short story.

My own criticism of *The Penguin Book of Canadian Short Stories* is that BIPOC writers are under-represented; several Indigenous writers should be included in a "Canadian" short story

anthology. Moreover, there are too many narratives set in the prairies where there is little to no plot – the most pleasurable experience is the picturesque landscapes and our familiarity with them. For instance, Munro's opening story, "The View from Castle Rock," seems like an excellent choice for the first story in the anthology because Munro's work is canonized in modern English literature, and this story is about an immigrant family representing Munro's family history. Canada is a cultural mosaic where cultures co-exist, but having this story open the anthology highlights the absence of Indigenous writers in this collection. Originally from Scotland, the family moves to Canada to farm, a ubiquitous trope in Canlit. The characters are not fleshed-out, but seem very hollow, lacking any uniqueness or memorability; it is not the most enjoyable read and might seem to illustrate Metcalf's claim that Canlit is uninspired and the work of celebrated Canadian writers, no matter how uninspired it is, will be renowned simply because of their celebrity.

This 2008 fiasco does not represent Biblioasis today; the press continued to publish short stories, even after the hypocritical and overly hostile anti-Urquhart debacle that blighted the press' "mythology and personality." The prestigious small press has published many award-winning books in the years following the Salon Des Refusés controversy. In recent years, these books include Robyn Sarah's *My Shoes Are Killing Me* which won the Governor General's Award for English-Language Poetry, shortlisted Giller Prize finalists Anakana Schofield's *Martin John* and Samuel Archibald's *Arvida*, shortlisted Roger Writer's Trust Fiction Prize finalist and longlisted Giller Prize nominee Russell Smith's *Confidence*, and RBC Taylor Prize winner of \$30,000 for literary non-fiction for Mark Bourrie's *Bush Runner*. Lucy Ellmann's *Ducks, Newburyport* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in the United Kingdom and in 2019,

Wells acquired the North American publishing rights. It is currently Biblioasis's best-selling title.

CHAPTER III

SHORT STORIES

Short stories are unforgiving: every word counts, and the condensed structure requires refined worldbuilding that the reader accepts as complete yet limited. The genre demands excellence because it competes with novels – in terms of sales, a customary book will outsell a short story collection and draw in more readers, so short stories must excel creatively to satisfy their niche audience. Dr. André Narbonne, English professor at the University of Windsor, says that in high school in the 1970s, a teacher told him that one could make a living as a short story writer in Canada, which now seems impossible. Although aspirational, the funding for short story writing comes from arts grants and the Canadian Arts Council rather than from sales. As the first Canadian woman to win a Nobel Prize for Literature for her lifetime body of work (which was a remarkable moment for the genre), Munro made her living by selling her works in the American market. Munro told *The New Yorker* in 2012 after her Nobel Prize win, that for years of her literary career, she “thought that [short] stories were just practice, till [she] got time to write a novel” but realized “that they were all [she] could do” (Boseman), echoing the harmful sentiment that novels are superior to short stories.

Biblioasis’ history as a short story publisher is one way the press demonstrates they do not value financial profitability over publishing great (but unprofitable) literary works. Impressively, the indie publishing house has Giller Prize nominations for the following short story collections: Alexander MacLeod’s *Light Lifting*, Donald Winkler's translation of Archibald's *Arvida*, Kathy Page’s *Paradise and Elsewhere* and *The Two of Us*, and Danuta Gleed's winning short story collection, *Bad Things Happen*. K.D. Miller’s *All Saints* was

shortlisted for the Rogers Trust Fiction Prize 2014, and *Late Breaking* was Long Listed for the Giller 2019. Miller is one of the authors Wells and Metcalf feature in the Salon des Refusés.

The credibility of the Giller award has been discussed for well over a decade in Canada, with Henighan publishing “Kingmakers” in 2006 for *Geist*, a Canadian literary magazine where he was a columnist. “Kingmakers” questions how the vast majority of Giller winners and shortlisted authors from 1994 to 2004 all live near Toronto or the GTA area (except for Mordecai Richler) and are published by Bertelsmann AG-associated Canadian publishing houses, which included Knopf Canada, Doubleday Canada, and Random House Canada; Bertelsmann owns 25% of McClelland and Stewart (“Kingmakers”). Criticizing Chapters-Indigo, Henighan says that well-received small press short stories could sell between 700 to 1,000 copies until the early 1990s when Chapters-Indigo devastated the network of independent Canadian bookstores supporting these smaller presses. At the time he writes this article, he says that Chapters-Indigo now makes it possible for 250 copies of these same short stories to be sold nation-wide (in the mid-2000s). Although the Giller has not done as much damage as the big-box bookstore chain, it is still an elitist organization and “Giller night was the preserve of a small clutch of anointed insiders,” and added that “if Chapters-Indigo is the disease, the Giller Prize is the symptom.” Trust bleeds away once credibility is lost. Credibility is important for the Giller Prize because the award brings together a community of readers interested in preserving culture through literature. The Giller Prize encourages discussions about literature and which texts deserve cultural accolades.

When Vincent Lam’s *Bloodletting & Miraculous Cures* appeared on the Giller longlist and shortlist in 2006, there were rumblings that its prose was “sloppy” and readers thought the short stories were “clichéd,” especially when compared to the sophisticated writing of Gaétan

Soucy and Rawi Hage. Lam's short story collection went on to win the Giller in that year and Henighan thinks it is because Doubleday published the book and the Giller has to "to make one concession to the Bertelsmann Group." Henighan suspects a conspiracy between Munro and Atwood, (both writers publish with Bertelsmann Group affiliated presses) since they both withdrew their Giller nominated books in 2006 as a "canny strategy enabl[ing] the old guard[s] to become kingmakers." Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* was almost certain to win the Giller in 2003 when the *Globe and Mail* reported that two of the jury members had close personal ties with the author and that whenever David Staines is anointed as a jury member, Atwood's publisher, McClelland and Stewart, always wins the prize. Many speculate that this negative publicity forced the Giller to award M. G. Vassanji the prize for the second time, which did not help their credibility considering the public discontent when Munro won her second Giller the following year in 2004. Henighan argues against the monopolization of the Giller by the Bertelsmann Group, which he believes the centralization of Toronto-based publishers encourages. At the 2006 Giller dinner, the party favours were gifted by Chapters-Indigo and included a "remaindered" Stephen King book, which worries Henighan because Canada's future generation of readers will forget Atwood, Lam, and Munro, but will be "intimately acquainted with [writers like] Stephen King." Atwood and Munro's complacency in the monopolization of Canlit will lead to their downfall. They could have helped create a solution to sell Canadian books more effectively, but they chose not to progress Canlit, according to Henighan.

Henighan's career and legacy suffered because of his Giller criticisms – his work as a novelist and short story writer was overshadowed by his label as an "anti-Giller critic" after 2007. Samuel Archibald's *Arvida* nomination as a finalist for the 2015 Giller Prize on October 5th, meant that Henighan was now invited to the Giller dinner because he worked on the

nominated book “which [he] had edited in consultation with translator Donald Winkler and Biblioasis publisher Dan Wells” (“How a Giller Prize critic”). At the time, Henighan was the volunteer general editor for Biblioasis’ International Translation Series. He had been criticizing the Giller for fifteen years at this point. Caught in an ironic situation, Henighan considered the backlash he had experienced, reassessed his “Kingmaker” article, and published a new article with the *Globe and Mail* titled “How a Giller Prize critic got invited to the party” in 2015. In his original critique, he suggested that the jurors and the finalists were too friendly, which makes some of the nominations biased. Lam, who Henighan claims got the Giller because of the Atwood controversy, is of Asian heritage, and “some of the responses to [his] column crossed into the poisoned territory of race,” but Henighan rejects these claims. He is glad he criticized the Giller because it made an impact –the Giller “replaced its cozy juries of long-time familiars with a system of one Canadian, one American, and one British or Irish juror.” The international juries selected winners “that were excessively commercial or head-scratchingly incomprehensible” in the years following but Henighan “was pleased when the enlarged 2015 jury of three Canadians and two foreigners produced a list chock full of literary-press titles” that included *Arvida*.

After publishing an essay in *Canadian Notes and Queries* that was reprinted by Tightrope Books in *The Best Canadian Essays 2012*, Henighan says that he avoided publicly discussing the Giller and moved on to give his attention to his fiction and editing the Biblioasis International Translation Series for years until *Arvida*’s nomination in 2015 brought the Giller Prize back into his life. Concluding the article, he declares that he will attend the Giller Prize banquet proudly “given all the work [he has] done for the prize” and that he has earned his dinner as an editor of short-listed titles, not as a Giller antagonist.

Arvida is a localized collection of stories, with the title referencing a settlement in Québec that is a part of the City of Saguenay. The president of Alcoa aluminum, Arthur Vining Davis, founded Arvida in 1927, and the name is a combination of the first two letters of his first, middle, and last name. As a French industrial city, it does not seem like a charming setting for the fantastical themes in the short stories, but the gothic imagery and melancholic tone construct a folkloric Québécois landscape unfamiliar even to Francophone residents; this Arvida is mythological. Archibald and his narrator were born in the industrial city built in one hundred and thirty-five days, and all the stories are about working-class struggles with finances, interpersonal relationships, and the allure of moving for better prospects in larger cities like Québec City and Montréal. Supernatural occurrences, monsters, and mystique afflict this metropolis.

“Jigai” is the ninth short story in the book and is the only one set outside of Arvida. This short story is an outlier in Archibald’s collection for its violent gore and foreign landscape outside of the industrial city the other stories inhabit. It is unclear how “Jigai” fits into the collection, yet the Japanese folk tale does not seem inappropriate. Archibald somehow creates a cohesive set of defamiliarized stories that are linked by their concern with the essentials of human existence including case studies of the hardships of the middle and working classes. Set in early twentieth-century imperial Japan, the story centers Misaka and Reiko who challenge their patriarchal society by mutilating themselves as an act of self-expression, performing their bodily autonomy. Other women begin to join them, disfiguring themselves, believing they are countering misogyny and oppression.

The story opens with “the men say,” retelling the feminist narrative through the male gaze, proving the inevitability of phallogocentrism. The line, “she came from the ends of the earth with pebbles in her pockets” (Archibald 109), repeats throughout the tale, as does “the men

say.” Misaka arriving with pebbles in her pockets “is an apt maxim, as the carrying of stones (or pebbles) in a woman’s pockets is a metaphor for her oppression – particularly her sexual oppression – in East Asian culture” (Sampson). Meanwhile, Misaka and Reiko combat the men’s reiteration of events by inserting their voices – “Reiko says” and “Misaka says” occur right after “the men say,” refusing passivity even in a narrative that starts and ends with the male voice. “Jingai” concludes with, “Akira Gengei said to himself, in Ainu” (Archibald 124), the male voice of the original narrator and the innkeeper who knew Misaka best (109).

Multiple accounts of events by multiple narrators are embedded the tale, making the meta-narrative unreliable. Each narrator tells their side of the story, often in coded narrative fragments, with a character-bound focalizer restricting the narrative's epistemological range. The terms “fabula” and “syuzhet” were terms first used by Vladimir Propp and Viktor Shklovsky and Russian Formalists, who influenced the development of modern narratology. Propp, a folklorist researcher, theorized that narratives are character driven – the plot relies on the character’s actions. Shklovsky’s theory of defamiliarization suggests that writers are supposed “to innovate within and against the constraints of literary tradition” (Liveley 3). Focalizers have their own predispositions, creating inevitable gaps in the plot. Therefore, the fabula, or the chronological order of events, is different from the syuzhet, or the order in which the events are told. One narrator never tells the same part of the story as the previous narrator; they all tell fragments of the same overarching story of the destructiveness of Misaka and Reiko's relationship, but depending on the narrator, the destructiveness represents the downfall of Japan's stability for the men or the reclamation of bodily autonomy for the women. For instance, the men are described as cold, void of feeling, in militaristic terms. Even the men themselves define themselves in this way: "The men say" that "there was nothing that could be done to protect them from themselves

and the madness that had seized hold of their minds" about Misaka and Reiko's mutilations, yet they also acknowledged that the "Great War" sent the men "off, they saw what there was to see, they didn't die, and they felt nothing. Not fear, not disgust, not pleasure, not anything," (Archibald 115) depicting shell-shock or PTSD. The comrades of the regime went back to their villages and were expected to suppress their mental afflictions and physical ailments, and tried "to not think of the war, tried to hide their mangled or absent limbs in the sleeves of their shirts or pant legs, tried to forget the great swathes of their souls that had collapsed within them and now surfaced only in nocturnal outbursts of terror loosed from the depths of a nightmare" (115). Both the soldiers and Misaka and Reiko inflict injuries on their bodies – the women carve wounds on their bodies while the warriors torment their minds, ignoring their traumas. The patriarchal society the men and women live in is responsible for the downfall of the soldiers and Misaka and Reiko – if society did not expect the men to suppress their emotions and experiences, the soldiers could seek treatment for their mental health struggles, or at least acknowledge that they are not as whole as they were before the Great War. Misaka and Reiko's fragmentation is visible – they cut their flesh, believing that it is a medium of art, "imprint[ing] on the flesh sinuosities that resembled writing" (117). Soldiers also inflict bodily harm on others and willingly go to war knowing that their bodies may return mutilated. Misaka and Reiko are vehicles to understand the human condition's complexities and mental health struggles.

Reiko's relationship with Misaka further portrays power imbalance; they met because Misaka was her governess, meaning that Reiko must be a lot younger than Misaka and that she was most likely a child when Misaka educated her. The men recall "Reiko's absence from among the children eventually [catching] the attention of the wives" (114), confirming that Reiko is underage. Misaka grooms Reiko as her trusted guardian, who later becomes her lover. They

engage in sexual acts, including an instance where Reiko exposes herself to Misaka; Misaka says that she found her “naked from waist to feet, her thin legs and pink sex settled on the covers” seeing Reiko “cutting a deep gash in the flesh of her right thigh with a tracing wheel” (112-3). Instead of stopping her and warning her uncle about the self-harm, Misaka encourages her to continue this mutilation by telling her not to feel “guilty or ashamed nor ever think that in punishing her body she was damaging someone’s property” (113). Although this is a dark fairy-tale where Reiko is implied to be a supernatural being, the real-life implications of such a disastrous situation are difficult to ignore. A woman’s body being her property is a feminist sentiment many people support but assisting in the potential suicide of a minor in an adult’s care represents an abuse of power which seems designed to shock the reader to the core. Misaka should have reported this incident to her uncle and discouraged her from hurting her flesh. In Reiko’s eyes, Misaka never forced her to do anything against her will – it was all consensual. Reiko addresses people’s concerns that the horrible dissipation were “forced in [her] by Misaka” and that “nothing has been forced into [her] mouth, into [her] cleft, between [her] buttocks or into [her] flesh” (117).

The ritualistic mutilations subvert the enemy soldier’s expectations – these soldiers pillage and rape women in the villages they occupy, so the women began to bind their ankles “so that no soldier might be tempted to wrest from their dead bodies what, living, they could have taken from them by force” (113-4). Misaka and Reiko honour this tradition but adapt it to their situations. At times, it seems like the mutilations are not about fighting the patriarchy as Misaka and Reiko believe; it appears like it is a fetish for the two women. The homoeroticism threatens the renegades in the village, who send Azumi, Mabuto’s wife, to investigate what is going on with Misaka and Reiko. The encounter is described in erotic terms – Misaka and Reiko show

Azumi Misaka's body, and there is a "curiosity that lent a gleam to her large black pupils." Then, Misaka "went down on all fours," evocative of a sexual position, then "thrust her face between the legs of Azumi, already dazed by the drug and the pain" while "Azumi didn't protest, she even unfastened her dress a bit more and in a sudden spasm, offered her cleft to Misaka's mouth" (118). Once again, Misaka instigates the sexual encounters, except this time, there are drugs involved. Azumi's sexual encounter happens when she is under the influence and may not consent. Later in the story, Misaka "knew that [they'd] gone too far" and even let Azumi go home "dazed, dishevelled, and covered in her own blood" (119). Azumi did not voluntarily agree to the mutilations when she was sober; this is a strange fetishized sexual encounter. It is rape. Ironically, fighting against sexual assault was why the actual mutilation ceremony began.

So, where are Reiko's other guardians to protect her? The parental figure in her life was her uncle, whom Reiko saw as her father figure even when her parents were still alive. She describes her parents as stoic and emotionless like the shell-shocked soldiers: "I felt as if my father, my mother and myself were dolls with porcelain faces on exhibit at the Inoué property, curios gathering dust while waiting for my uncle's visits" (111). Notice the lack of the Oxford comma when Reiko lists her father, herself and her mother. She groups herself and her mother together, solidifying a robust female connection. In all ways, Reiko is distant from men, except for her uncle, until he is no longer in her life once she retreats into solitude with Misaka. Her uncle adopts her after her parents die in a shipwreck in Okhost, leaving their only child an orphan. However, the uncle cannot devote himself to Reiko full-time because of his work schedule, so he hires Misaka as his niece's governess and the maternal figure. The unnamed uncle dresses Reiko in silk and offers her a good education so that one day she can accompany him to Paris, London, and New York, presumably for business purposes and wanting to make her

"a true Japanese and a real American" through schooling so that she can be "the most beautiful woman on earth, both the flower of the Empire and the entire world" (112). Colonialist implications are found everywhere in this text, but here the uncle implies that America represents the entire world, and by learning English, Reiko can be the most beautiful woman in the entire world. Even though the uncle is not a perfect "parent," he trusts Misaka, and she betrays this trust, violating Reiko, which leads to both of their demises.

Arvida is a part of the International Translation Series and was translated from French to English with Henighan as the General Editor at Biblioasis, just like Stéphane Larue's *Le Plongeur*, which became *The Dishwasher*. Both novels are set in Québec near Montréal and were originally published by Le Quartanier. On the very first page of the book, there is a preface about Biblioasis' International Translation Series, where Biblioasis states that "translation is the lifeblood of literature, that a language that is not in touch with other linguistic traditions loses its creative vitality, and that the worldwide spread of English makes literary translation more urgent now than ever" (i). English audiences would not have access to these two books without Biblioasis; the Giller may never have heard of *Arvida* without Winkler's translation of the original text.

Kathy Page's *Paradise & Elsewhere* was published in 2014 and longlisted for the Giller and the Frank O'Connor short fiction award and shortlisted for the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize in 2014. The short story collection bridges realism and mythology in a similar way to *Arvida*, where folklore and contemporary fiction meet. On Page's official website, she shares her satisfaction with Biblioasis as her publisher, citing a *Quill and Quire* reviewer who said that "if there is a gold standard for Canadian short fiction in the new millennium, it is probably set by Biblioasis. The press has been at the forefront, season after season, of producing collections by

some of the finest practitioners of the form, both veterans and newcomers” (“Biblioasis”). The title page of *Paradise and Elsewhere* features the phrase “a John Metcalf book” with “Biblioasis/Windsor, Ontario” stamped underneath. If a harsh critic like Metcalf stamps his seal of approval proudly on a short story collection, this means that it is a gold standard fiction collection representing Biblioasis’ best in the genre.

"G'Ming" is the opening short story in the collection that invites the reader into paradise...and elsewhere. Focusing on aspects of rural life, the first-person character-bound focalizer is a tour guide leading two tourists around his unnamed village. Framing the experience in a way that highlights the voyeuristic nature of tourism in developing countries, the husband and wife refuse to help or acknowledge the Indigenous peoples of the land and only seek to fulfill a personal experience on their soil; their vacation is the priority, and the pair does not contemplate the implications of their visit for the village. The villagers beg for one aeiki throughout the narrative, and the couple always refuses. The guide reminds them various times that "there are twenty aeiki to one dollar" (Page 10), but the couple gets angrier and less tolerant of the pleading further in the story – the husband is polite at first, then he "turns and puts his tongue out" and "puts his finger in his mouth and pulls it, making a noise like the cork from a bottle" (12) to mock the children, but the wife sympathizes with them and their "poor teeth" (11). Later, the couple is invited to drink tea at a villager's house, but they refuse. The narrator tells them that it is good hospitality to accept the offer, but the wife rejects the invitation in an urbane manner, admitting that it is very kind, and they would like to be friends with everyone, but "[they] do not have time to visit" (13).

There are some eerie moments in this scene: it is hard to tell what will happen to the couple. Ominous warnings come from the narrator, like when he says that he does not need to

hurry "because it will work out for [him] either way" adding that "if they give to the others, they will give to me. If they do not give to the others, still, in the end, they will give to me" (13). Considering that this is the first short story in the collection, it is difficult to decipher the tonality of the stories – is it horror? Psychological thriller? Mystery? Or simply contemporary fiction with fantastical elements? What does this statement mean for the couple – will they be robbed or victims of a more sinister crime? Page plays with these unknown elements, forcing the reader to examine their prejudices and assumptions regarding foreigners. In the end, the narrator demands his payment and contemplates leaving the village with his money, but ultimately stays in the village where he will live out his life. There is nothing escapist in this paradise – life is not idyllic but rather laborious and communal. Life outside of this village is self-indulgent and self-serving, as shown by the couple. The reader is a foreigner to the village's landscape and might perceive the villagers as foreigners, but the visiting Western tourists are outsiders. The audience walks the same path as the tourists, voyeuristically following the narrator through unfamiliar terrain.

“Of Paradise,” the third short story in the collection, caught my attention because of its folkloric Creation story. It begins with the same opening as the Bible – “In the beginning...” (25) but describes a different universe from the biblical one. In Abrahamic religions, the universe is void in the beginning, with no light, matter, or life – only God, who speaks everything into being in seven days. Page’s universe is a “fertile land and desert” that is “fullness and emptiness; colour, monochrome; fertility, barrenness” (25), oppositeness coexisting like yin and yang in East Asian religions. The people here “did not strive” but also “were not idle” or struggling; they “gardened, wove, painted” and enjoyed “the pleasures of the flesh” in peace (25). A speck moving closer to them becomes a wary traveler demanding water; the traveller is identified as a

“she” who wears a cloth over her flesh and speaks in a different language (27). Arguing whether they should exile the traveler because she is probably an outcast from a different tribe, they realize this would be cruel, so they allow her to stay and treat her like a guest. Deciding that she must learn their language to dissolve the communication barrier, they teach her some of their ways, but no matter how “well-taught and well-loved she was...she would always feel slightly apart from [them],” which could make “her secretly vengeful, excessively ambitious, or craving recognition, therefore dangerous” (30). These are the same arguments Westerners make against immigrants; they will take away their jobs or behave violently. In “G’Ming” and “Paradise,” the difference is identified as dangerous. Describing the stranger as fruitful and complicated, the people decide to send her back into the void. They give her supplies, food, and water for the journey. The narrator discovers the traveler has returned while she is gardening and embraces her. Initially, she is described as distinct from the tribe with no further detail, but now there are descriptors for her appearance. She is “still not beautiful,” and it is hard “to know how to respond” to her face and body, compelling the narrator to draw closer to the traveller. Feeling attracted to her unsettling “coarse skin and odd growths of hair,” the narrator lusts after the traveler and invites her back into the community. Now, the traveler demands to contribute to society with the same rights as everyone else, and they ultimately accept her request. Once they mate with her, the climax of the story begins – the narrator has intercourse with her first and notices that “she ha[s] no mouth between her legs” (34-5). This initially made me think these people are not human beings, but the following few words reveal that they are homo sapiens: she has a “thumb-like thing which swelled and grew in a way that to my mind was not entirely foreign, but which to begin with, filled many of us with fear and disgust” (35). At this moment, it is clear that this is a female clan that has never seen a man before – the traveler is not a “she,”

but the tribe does not know any other sex other than female, justifying the ugliness of the foreigner. The narrator is sexually attracted to him, but many of the other members are lesbians repulsed by his anatomical differences because they do not naturally desire his body. “No mouth” is confusing until you realize they are all women. The assumption is that the narrator is a woman, although Page never mentions gender aside from the traveler’s assumed gender, so this revelation subverts expectations. The landscape is a deconstruction of the Garden of Eden narrative – here, there is one man and many women, the women are on the land before the man, and the man is in a subordinate position. Additionally, most biblical scholars blame Eve for the Fall of Man because she seduces Adam into tasting the forbidden fruit, but in “Paradise,” man brings on the Fall in this utopia. While birth and death are the consequences of sin in the Bible, in this short story they are the result of having sex with a man. They “changed everything by degrees” because the tribe now becomes “the same as other beings, the birds that pass (. . .) above and the plants (. . .) [they] gr[o]w and [eat]” (35). The message of the story is confusing – it is not abstinence since the women pleased each other before the traveler arrives. Does it suggest that the man brought patriarchy into their world? Men seem to be invaders here, like a parasite or invasive species. They arrived in the utopia and changed it forever, although it does not indicate how the utopia shifts. It is easy to assume that the utopia becomes our modern world, especially when trying to link this short story with the other short stories in the collection.

MacLeod’s *Light Lifting* differs from *Arvida* and *Paradise and Elsewhere*. MacLeod’s urban fiction short story collection lacks fantastical elements, opting for realistic portrayals of moments of the characters’ lives; MacLeod becomes a professional runner, a competitive swimmer, a construction worker, a teenage boy, and a young woman. His short stories are written with such expertise, that every story feels like an autobiographical event.

Impressively, *Light Lifting* was highly acclaimed, becoming the American Library Association's Notable Book of 2012, the Irish Times Book-to-Read, a finalist for the Giller Prize and the Frank O'Connor Award, named *Globe & Mail*, *Quill & Quire*, and *Amazon.ca*'s Best Book of the Year, and winning the Atlantic Book Award in 2012. Alistair MacLeod, Alexander MacLeod's late father, one of Canada's most celebrated writers, was a master of the short story form; his son is likewise a brilliant author of short fiction. *The Economist*, an esteemed newspaper in magazine form, is known for its rigorous copyediting, limited reporting bias, and factual investigations – their audiences are high-earning, educated readers, as reflected in their expensive subscriptions. *Prospero*, a column in *The Economist* focusing on the creative arts, reviews books. On January 21st, 2012, *The Economist* published a glowing review for MacLeod's *Light Lifting*, titling it "Of Moose and Men: An Impressive Canadian Debut." The article points out that novels can take their time and gradually lure readers into their world, but short stories "rely on instant attraction and immediate gratification," ("Of Moose and Men"), leaving the reader hungry for more of the world. The short stories are successful because they are "long enough to immerse the reader totally" while plunging readers "into fully formed worlds," leaving out just the right amount of information. Furthermore, the review says that "each story has the weight of a novel" and that the writing is what carries the book; "the choice of words is spare, simple and unaffected, and the rhythm is perfect: despite the sadness that overlays many pieces, they flow with the comforting lull of a bedtime story." In criticizing MacLeod's characters, the review points out a con: the male characters are better formed than the female ones, but this makes sense since MacLeod seems to draw inspiration from some of his personal experiences as a man growing up in Windsor. It is a minor flaw since the stories do not

undermine women – he unintentionally does not give them as much weight as the male characters to whom he relates more.

“Miracle Mile” is the best story in the collection according to *The Economist*, and I must agree. The review praises the story for its ability to depict “the minutiae of pre-race nerves—the ‘hiss’ of a coach's hydraulic door; the temperature ‘just inching its way over toward cool’— as well as the ‘miraculous desperation’ that is winning.” As the first story in the collection, it sets a high standard for the rest of the narratives. The title refers to a Vancouver race in 1954 where Roger Bannister and John Landy ran a mile in under four minutes. Mikey, the protagonist, has a complicated relationship with his childhood friend, Burner. The two runners will compete against each other in an upcoming race, which brings back memories of the two athletes running with each other in their youth.

“This was the day after Mike Tyson bit off Evander Holyfield’s ear” – this is the first sentence of “Miracle Mile” and the opening of the short story collection, followed by “you remember that. It was a moment in history” (MacLeod 9). MacLeod places the reader in a nostalgic and familiar context, knowing that this 1997 event was a shocking cultural moment and that most of his readers remember the astonishment they felt hearing about it on television or reading the headlines in the newspaper. If readers do not remember the Tyson-Evander scandal, they will certainly recall Kennedy’s assassination or “the planes flying into the World Trade Center” or Ben Johnson testing positive in Seoul “after breaking the world record in the hundred” (9). Each cultural moment listed was transformative – it shifted the way people viewed boxing, or evoked endless conspiracy theories, or perhaps changed homeland security measures indefinitely. Even if those moments do not personally stick with the reader, MacLeod describes Tyson “standing there in his black trunks with blood in his mouth.” When he goes in for the kill,

“the way his cheek brushes up almost intimately against Evander’s face just before he breaks all the way through and gives in to his rawest impulse...the tendons in his neck bulge out and his eyes pop wide open and his teeth come grinding down” (9), transporting the reader back into that moment that happened thirteen years prior to the publication of *Light Lifting* with these ghastly descriptions.

Moreover, MacLeod’s carefully crafted language forces the reader into a participatory position when he describes biting down on an ear, as if the audience is Tyson in action. Using inflammatory language evokes an emotional response from the reader, engaging their interest and investment in the narrative. MacLeod redirects the narrative’s focalization from evoking emotional response from the audience to showing where Mikey was when the incident occurred: he learned about it on television, like most people, and “turned the TV off but the leftover buzz hanging in the air still hurt [his] eyes” (10). This anchors the reader in the moment, describing an uncomfortable feeling of TV static lingering in the atmosphere that grounds the short story in everyday modern reality, focusing on a micro-moment of mundane life.

Mikey switches between narrating the Bannister-Landy race and his own race with Burner, drawing parallels between the two events. This highlights the insignificance of the Mikey-Burner race in sports pop culture – even if both athletes manage to run a mile in under four minutes like Bannister and Landy, they will not break any records or garner much praise since it has been accomplished before. Once Burner wins the race, his fame is short-lived, and he walks away the same man he essentially was when he arrived at the track. People forget about his win, and no one knows who Mikey is because he was not the winner and did not even get a short-lived celebration.

Racing under the Windsor-Detroit tunnel as children, Mikey and Burner escape danger many times. Mikey narrates flashbacks of the runners attempting to outrun an oncoming train, nearly losing their lives. This establishes a strong sense of setting for anyone living in the Windsor-Detroit region and connects them to the world of the narrative. MacLeod's linking of reality and narrative enhances his worldbuilding and makes the story more significant – Windsorites have heard many tragic stories of people attempting to cross the tunnel on foot or swim across the river. Biblioasis' reputation as a short story publisher and their roots in the Windsor-Essex region makes *Light Lifting* an excellent addition to their catalogue, one which was well-received by Windsorites and Canadians at large and became a very profitable investment for the Windsor press.

CHAPTER IV

ARTISTIC STATEMENTS VS. PUBLISHING COSTS

Ephemera, such as bookmarks, receipts, catalogues, and posters, make an artistic statement but are not intended to survive; they are useful in the short-term, then discarded. Biblioasis' ephemera reveals what they claim to stand for. The bookmarks advertise all the necessary information about the bookshop. The top third of the bookmark reproduces Biblioasis' logo – it is a windmill with a capital “B” as the foundation. Vines and flowers entangle the windmill and “B,” creating an intricate piece of art with a thick blue border. Blue ink is used for most of the bookmarks, except for the address, phone number, and website information in the middle of the space that is printed in black ink. Referencing Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, the logo represents an English idiom, “tilting at windmills,” which represents attacking imaginary enemies. It is safe to assume that Biblioasis' enemies are larger publishers like HarperCollins Publishing, Penguin Random House, Simon & Schuster, Hachette, and Macmillan. At the bottom of the bookmark, there are two notable sections – the first says, “Windsor's only new and used bookstore,” which is sort of true if you do not include the University of Windsor's Campus Bookstore that sells new and used books. Secondly, at the very bottom of the bookmark – the only text within the border says, “Read Independently,” followed by “Review us on Yelp!” in smaller font. Encouraging customers to review Biblioasis on Yelp implies that they will be positive reviews, which means that the customer is invested in the shop and promotes it to others. Reading independently connotes good education, free-thinking, and intelligence, making the customer feel wise and considerate after shopping at Biblioasis.

Wells describes Biblioasis' foundation as accidental; he realized that he wanted to spend his life encircled by books, although he did not know what to do with his master's degree other than becoming an "unwanted professor of the Scottish Enlightenment struggling away for tenure" (McKetta). Purchasing 5,000 books at an auction, some of which included first editions of Ernest Hemingway and Tasha Tudor, Wells decided he wanted to try bookselling – "I opened the bookstore fully expecting it to fail within a year — everyone told me it would fail — and then I'd get it out of my blood and go on and get a doctorate. But it didn't fail." The bookseller goes on to say, "I guess what I'm trying to get at is that the bookstore was accidental, and much that has happened after, and the various shapes and permutations this whole literary press experiment has taken since, have been equally accidental." BookFest Windsor, formerly the Windsor Festival of Books, introduced Wells to Metcalf because Wells ran the literary event for numerous years. At the festival, Wells met Blaise, Goran Simić, Griggs, and Caroline Adderson.

Wells' artistic side prevails over his practice as a businessman, which paradoxically helps Biblioasis' small business – they stand out among the presses valuing profit over artistic integrity. Biblioasis consciously creates a personality and mythology rather than focusing on sheer materialism, but they still manage their financial decisions superbly. The press is profitable, and the bookstore became more profitable than ever during the pandemic. Ala's *Straight Razor and Other Poems* was a long-term investment for Biblioasis, considering it is a book of poetry, and poetry usually loses money for the press publishing it. However, Wells saw the great potential for this book and published it anyway (like a lot of small, independent presses that choose to publish poetry for its literary value, knowing the books will not sell). Biblioasis won the Alcan Award for Ala's *Straight Razor and Other Poems*, their first trade book, setting a high standard for the press. In Biblioasis' Fall 2014 catalogue in the "Note from the Publisher,"

Wells discusses the overwhelming sense of pride he felt when he first held *Straight Razor and Other Poems* in his hands; “We stopped everything that day to celebrate, and didn’t work much for the next several days . . . every customer who came through the door was forced to at least pause and flip through and marvel at the book’s beauty. You would have thought we were Gutenberg, so enamoured were we with our own creation.” Underscoring the materiality of the publication, Wells expresses how highly he values the aesthetic of his books, comparing Ala’s poetry collection to artisanal Gutenberg works. Furthermore, the Biblioasis 2005 catalogue – the first catalogue launched, describes the craftsmanship of the books: Smyth-sewn and perfect bound; cover printed via letter press; hardcover edition is hand-cased in quarter cloth and hand-marbled paper. Wells clearly cares about making a good quality book that looks beautiful and showcases craftsmanship. In the Spring 2008 catalogue, *The Montreal Gazette* says, “Biblioasis [is] one of two fairly new houses specializing in handsome literary productions worth buying simply for the pleasure of owning beautiful objects,” demonstrating that Biblioasis cares about the creativity, presentation, and artistry in their books.

Isla McKetta interviewed Wells in 2014 for an article titled, “Portrait of a Press: Canadian Biblioasis Thrives in ‘South Detroit’,” nine years after Biblioasis opened their press’ doors to the public. Responding to the question, “What got you excited about starting a press,” Wells says that he took bookbinding classes and wanted to produce chapbooks because he was tired of creating blank notebooks, solidifying his artistic intentions for the foundation of the press and bookshop. Another interesting answer comes in response to McKetta asking him, “What would you describe as the aesthetic behind the press?” followed by, “How do you source your authors and translators?” Wells admits that Biblioasis publishes some commercial titles to “help keep doors open,” but they just “publish books [they] like.” Publishing commercial titles will

allow the press to expand their business' scope, avoiding limitations such as publishing only certain genres or a specific demographic of writers. He goes on to say that,

. . . over time, we've come to be known as the Canadian press for the short story, and one of a handful dedicated to largely formal poetry. We're also one of the few who regularly publish literary criticism. And we may be the only press in the country with a focus on international translation. There are a few presses which publish back and forth between Canada's official languages — French and English — but few which translate at all outside of them. And none which look outside of the country's borders. It's one of the things which make Biblioasis unique . . . the press pays almost exclusive attention to the way its writers employ language and a belief that this cannot be separated from either the structure or the narrative or a work's meaning. . . if they haven't got the words right, the structure right, then their work is not for us.

Being inclusive and open-minded allows a wider variety of books in the press' catalogue, but Biblioasis still establishes its reputation as a publishing house specializing in short stories, translation, and fiction at large.

Another noteworthy admission from Wells is that Canadian government funding does not influence Biblioasis' publications very much. Being one of a few presses "whose sales outstrip government support," Biblioasis got very little funding in the first few years of running the press, although that has changed with an increase of funding provincially and federally which allowed the press to "grow and expand." Other than "making things more possible," the funding "has not affect[ed] the way [they] do business." The press, although Canadian, does not limit themselves to only Canadian writers because a big part of Biblioasis' mythology is that they believe that "literature doesn't recognize political borders," so they are open to international talent. However, although there is "next to no funding" for their translation projects, yet they pursue translation regardless. Translation is an area that Wells would love to expand, but it is costly and exhausts the press' resources. At the time of the interview, he acknowledges that Biblioasis is working

towards a solution to bridge this financial barrier and to raise money for more translation works to be possible.

McKetta asks one final question: “Is your logo inspired by Don Quixote?” Wells answers yes and explains why they chose the windmill as Biblioasis’ logo. The windmill is “a reminder of the essential comedy underlining this enterprise, as a reminder to try and keep the proper spirit, to laugh and not take myself or this whole Biblioasis thing too seriously.” A windmill’s design is simple and memorable, making it an ideal icon for a logo. Wells’ response emits an optimism often not seen in the publishing industry, especially for a small press threatened with financial strains daily. Biblioasis remains a beacon of hope in an industry threatened by the larger publishing houses marginalizing indie presses.

Amy Bobeda’s essay, “Keeping the Bear Afloat: Lessons from Diane di Prima’s Small Press Legacy,” examines what role art plays in business. The essay opens with Terry Tempest Williams’ chapbook project to save the Utah wilderness; Williams asked writers to contribute to this chapbook to help stop the United States government from passing legislation that would negatively impact wildlife. Every writer she contacted accepted her request and submitted a piece of writing to help her cause, along with monetary donations “to cover printing costs” (Bobeda). Di Prima let “members of Congress read the book aloud on the Senate floor in a filibuster,” becoming a “paragon of grassroots poetic activism.” Bobeda concludes the paragraph by summarizing the power of language: “for one day, as the author recounts in *When Women Were Birds*, Congress prioritized poetry over profit, and the United States saw another sunset across the red rocks of Utah’s exquisite wilderness.” Many people thought di Prima’s efforts were in vain before the chapbook made it to Congress, but her attempt to intermingle politics and

art successfully stopped the legislation from passing. It is a writer's job to move those with the power to better society; this story shows how art conquers profit.

Bobeda tackles the future of publishing while explaining the financial issues many self-published writers, poets, and smaller presses face if they want to publish their art. Ingram is a publishing and distribution company that has print-on-demand services that many smaller presses and self-published authors and bookstores use for their books. ISBN numbers play a huge role in the distribution of books and are necessary for inventories in bookshops but cost \$125 plus \$25 for barcodes. Ingram does not distribute books from DIY publishers. Working at Biblioasis' bookshop, I see the importance of ISBN numbers daily, since they are used by bookstores to organize books, track inventory, and keep track of books that need to be returned to the distributor. This directly impacts finances – for instance, bi-yearly, bookstores usually go through their inventories and return books that have not been sold in the last six months. There is a return window where bookstores can return unsold books to the distributors. Without consistent returns, bookstores would have too much unsold and undesired inventory with no space to stock it while their financial resources are exhausted. Bookstores would not be able to afford risks, such as stocking controversial books, unique books, and small press books. Certain genres would become obsolete in smaller, independent bookshops, like poetry, short stories, and translations – genres that are not bestsellers. Many bookshops would carry more commercially successful titles and fewer experimental, literary works if they want to financially prosper. Artistic merit would fade away in the literary community as many unconventional and non-commercial writers would fade into obscurity. Bobeda observes that “as more bookstores gravitate toward ordering through Ingram, fewer and fewer carry chapbooks without ISBN numbers, indie books without titles on

their spines, and works by new presses and self-published authors.” These barriers to distribution include the cost of retail shelf space.

Choosing to publish with a formal press rather than self-publishing or DIY publishing may be more costly, but it will “make a book accessible for years to come in libraries and archives.” Economic accessibility is a part of this larger conversation about preservation. Not many writers have the financial means to cover the editing, design, printing, distribution, and ISBN costs that “var[y] from hundreds to thousands of dollars depending on aforementioned factors, number of copies printed, and marketing.” Another factor Bobeda highlights is the tight time frame to publish current political texts, such as Cook’s *The Least We Can Do*, since these works “can’t wait for the traditional publishing timelines,” needing to respond to political issues as they occur.

Some presses in recent years fund many books through crowdfunding platforms, such as Kickstarter, which “allows a press or self-publisher to cover costs upfront as well as gauge a book’s potential pre-sale popularity.” Margot Atwell, the head of publishing for Kickstarter said during *The Next Page: Creating the Future of Publishing*, a 2019 digital Kickstarter conference, that she predicts by 2025 “publishing will be more diverse and community-driven across revenue streams, making literature of all varieties more accessible.” Atwell predicts that this shift in funding is based on the rise in diverse revenue streams in the publishing industry, such as higher demands for book subscriptions, crowdfunding, the reduction of print runs that exceed a book’s demand and increases in digital publications. In 2019, nine percent of Kickstarter campaigns were publishing projects. During Kickstarter’s 11 years of business, \$200 million was raised for “publishing projects, with “\$25.6 million [in pledges] for book projects” in 2020. This data tells

us that the future of publishing may be on digital platforms and embracing new technologies could be a better long-term financial decision than traditional print runs.

There is a creative aspect to crowdfunded publishing platforms: Bobeda clarifies how these platforms bridge the gap between the writer and the reader by letting the latter “choose which books get made, which has resulted in books being published that speak to experiences that often aren’t represented in mainstream publishing.” Direct communication between the writer and the consumer expands the creative scope of the project; the writer can find out exactly what the consumer desires to manage the supply and demand better. Mainstream publishing limits the number of texts publishing houses publish, weeding out those riskier works that may not yield enough profit. Even those publishing houses that publish riskier works knowing they will lose money for the sake of art still consider the amount of financial strain it will cause their business – Biblioasis often publishes poetry and books that are traditionally not profitable genres, but they still release novels, cookbooks, and local fiction they know Windsorites will buy, in order to make their money back. Crowdfunding allows the customer to fund niche projects, which shows the writer how many people are interested in purchasing their work. Accessibility to crowdfunding “allows publishers at any level to try new ideas and take risks before a book goes to print, and to do so on their own timeline without grant restrictions.” Shifting the definition of a book is necessary for this new digital age: traditional books will always remain an important medium to preserve history, distribute information, and allow people to access materials in public spaces like a library. However, digital information is cheaper, faster to distribute, and requires less labour, consolidating its importance in the publishing industry.

CHAPTER V

INTERVIEW WITH DAN WELLS

Biblioasis founder, Dan Wells, sat down for an interview that took place inside of his office at the press on March 25th, 2022.

Would there be a Biblioasis without John Metcalf? To what extent did his literary tastes and critical values give energy to the press in its first years?

There would have been a Biblioasis without John. It would have been a different experience and organization. It probably would not have grown the way it did - it was having him there and his experience, support, and tutelage, as well as his tastes and judgements which affected things. We'd already decided to publish books; that is what started the first conversation. As we had already decided to start publishing, we had already signed up Salvatore Ala's *Straight Razor* as our first poetry book. I was running Bookfest Windsor at the time, so I was already thinking of writers like Goran Simić and writers I met through the event. But reading John's *An Aesthetic Underground* was one of the things that made me realize, "yeah, I can do this." I had read his book six or seven months before we talked at Bookfest. The realization came to me that the bookselling job, the curation, is like building a collection. And building a bookstore is not that different from building a list. John was the first person that made me realize this is not something you need to go to school for. So, in that regard, without John, without his memoir, maybe I don't make that leap. There is no doubt that partnering with John shaped the early days of Biblioasis. I was interested in the short story - associating with John made it a priority. I was in awe - and am still in awe, of him. The fact that John came to join us gave Biblioasis a prestige and trust within a certain writing community we would not have otherwise. It takes years to build up the

credibility that John gave us in one go, by joining us, which allowed us to attract a better set of writers right away. That also shaped things. One of the other sides is that I wanted John to be a part of Biblioasis, but I did not want Biblioasis to just reflect John's aesthetic. Translation became another way we deviated from John's literary vision for the press. I wanted Biblioasis to be more "Catholic" – to bring in a much wider variety of editorial positions; I think we accomplished that.

Advice John gave me is that you have to trust your gut. Even when he has disagreed with our other selections, he never discourages them. The Translation Series is one of the biggest ways we deviate from Metcalf. A lot of writers we brought into the list were not in the aesthetic tradition John was working with, such as Alexander MacLeod, but John came around to his quality.

How has Metcalf's role with the press changed?

In the early days . . . if you look at our first year, we did Ala and four chapbooks – all pieces he selected. Going into the second year, we have Simić books, and two or three books John brought in. Just due to the size of our operations in the earlier days, he had a much bigger hand in shaping the majority of books. Now, we do thirty books a year, with John doing five or six. I do not think his role has changed – he is still there as a guiding light and spirit, partner, and editorial confidant. He is free to make his own editorial decisions. The things that brought us together in the first place, like the attraction to the Canadian short story and our admiration for writers like Clark Blaise and Ray Smith – that is all still there. Biblioasis has grown in unexpected ways that reflect the relationship that he does not necessarily have a hand in.

Steven Henighan, editor of the Biblioasis International Translation Series, reportedly described editing practices at the press as "Catholic." First, is this correct and, second, do you agree?

Can you explain what this means in terms of the press' identity?

Steven came up with that description of things. John and I were always more closely aligned editorially than Steven and myself. There was always tension editorially between the two of us. He was the first person that made me aware that this "Catholicity" is a strength for the press.

Editorial practices are not Catholic, but the editorial selection may be described that way. We are austere in our editorial approach to text. I am doing a translation right now that Steven has edited, and it will go through three or four rounds – all books receive this kind of attention at Biblioasis.

A professor at the University of Windsor teaches a course on Biblioasis. I remember when he told me he wants to find a book that represents Biblioasis. This was not something I was comfortable with, but I was interested to see what would become of it. He seemed frustrated by the diversity of style at the time – he could not pin down something as the "Biblioasis virtue." When I was much more inexperienced as a publisher, I would have been worried about that. I agree with Steven, whatever our other disagreements are, that the range we bring in is a virtue. We can rely on the passions and enthusiasm of a very diverse range of minds not always in accord.

There is more that we can do as well. Yes, we have consistency. Steven has been here for fifteen years, and John has been here since the beginning. Even former editors still bring us in authors

and texts. Former writers bring in other writers. There is a community that is not connected to the editorial side. People tell other people, "Hey, there is a community here and I think you belong."

Alexander MacLeod's debut story collection, Light Lifting, was shortlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize. As the fiction editor for Biblioasis, what were Metcalf's initial thoughts on MacLeod's collection? What commentary did he have for Light Lifting?

John did not read it for three or four years after publication because we had our separate lists. That book came together very quickly. People tell this story about how it took ten years, but eighty percent of it was written a year before publication. The last story, "The Number Three," is completely different in the Advanced Reader's Copy than in the final version. We were editing up until the last day. John, in that sense, did not have the opportunity to read it, but that was not a Metcalf selection. Although, he read it later and came to believe that it was one of the most important short story collections published in the new century.

Josh Cook in The Least We Can Do says that books on display in a bookstore show "what ideas we want to give space to" (Cook 6). What does Cook's pamphlet represent for Biblioasis?

It is part of a continuing work. It took me a very long time to say I was a publisher without hesitation. You feel like an imposter. I was not trained into this – I proceed with trial and error. What John was saying in *An Aesthetic Underground* is that I am the publisher that I am because of the bookseller I am. More and more, the bookstore is very central to the identity of the press. What I am doing with Cook's work that is forthcoming is memorializing booksellers but also giving them a space to talk about the role and shape of bookselling. I agree with that statement,

but I do not have to agree with everything Cook says in this essay or his book – our politics are not perfectly aligned. My job as an editor is not to agree with what a writer says, but to make sure they understand what they are saying and that they are saying their statements as clearly as possible. I have a less political view of the bookshop as a space, though; reading Cook has sharpened my own view within it. Working on these books changes my perspectives as I go. I am a different bookseller for having worked on that pamphlet.

How has the pandemic impacted business at the press and the bookshop?

Let's start at the bookshop. We were going to close pre-pandemic but in a strange sort of way, the pandemic saved the bookshop. It forces me to go there regularly, even though I do not primarily work there anymore, and it forced me to see how important the shop is to me and Biblioasis' identity. It also showed me what was wrong with it in the first place. By being here for four or five months and having to see what people were and were not buying, along with what we were not supplying, we were able to turn it around. Our sales are eighty percent higher than they were this time two years ago. The pandemic has been good for the bookstore spiritually and financially.

At the press, it has been harder. 2019-2020 was the best year in press history. Certainly, the following year was going to take a dive. We had Lucy Ellmann's *Ducks Newburyport* sell fifty thousand copies, Mark Bourrie's *Bush Runner* just won the RBC Taylor Prize Jury Citation and was on the bestsellers list, and Roy Jacobsen's *The Unseen* was just getting set to launch. We were in an incredible financial position. Sales are down now twenty or so percent on the press side. That said, it is still our second and third best years ever. In that sense, we are still profitable.

We are still doing well. The quality of our books still stands. Our lists have become more diverse in all the senses of the word. As with Cook's pamphlet, the pandemic and everything that has happened since has forced us to reconsider our responsibilities as publishers, which is pushing us in a slightly different direction.

You talk about the influence of Metcalf – well, Metcalf was almost purely literary. I do not want to say that our non-fiction is not literary, but we are doing vaster ranges of books dealing with socio-political issues that would not have been possible with just Metcalf's vision for the press.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, what happened to the employees? How many did you lay off?

I did not have to lay off any employees – we had some who asked to be laid off at the bookstore, but not at the press. There was one editor on the regional history program at the press who moved more to a part-time freelance position, but that had nothing to do with the pandemic. This editor was heading towards this direction, anyway. To link it to the pandemic would be a mistake. A few hours may have been reduced for part-timers, but there was no change in the staff during the pandemic. In part, this is due to the social programs that made this possible. There were wage supplements that made it possible, even when sales were down, to keep people on-board.

With the COVID-19 pandemic possibly passing, what changes do you see in the future—in terms of marketing, will book publishing return to an “old normal”?

No, and I am not sure we want it to return to an "old normal." Just before coming here to this interview, I had a conversation about starting new live events again. I expect there will be some

live events soon, but we will not go back to the way things were. It will be more of a hybrid of the new and old normal – we will go out into public more and do more live events, but are we going to do the number of events we did before the pandemic? No. In part, it did not make sense for us to be doing them that frequently pre-pandemic, anyway. There was one year we did one hundred and seventy-five events as a small publisher. So much energy and resources go into that. Of course, the authors want these live events to happen, but they were not the best use of resources. The pandemic has forced us to rethink habitual forms of marketing, making us reconsider how we are running things. This made us stronger. We can look at author tours and whether they impacted sales. We are investing more in digital marketing and things that are working for us. You can get more attendance at virtual events, especially since people can go back and view the video if they cannot attend live. If you are looking at sales events as a marketing channel, which many small publishers do, online events fail. I think what will happen for us is that we will start filming live events because we are much more aware of these broadcasting possibilities. We can do an event and reach people in California.

Typically, Biblioasis books acknowledge ongoing financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Council for the Arts, Canadian Heritage, the Canada Book Fund, and the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Arts Council and the Ontario Media Development Corporation. To what extent are your publishing choices compromised as a result of receiving support from government institutions that might value Canadian content over literary concerns?

Zero compromise. We are grateful for the support we get. We can obviously do more because of the funding we receive. If anything, what funding does is allow the first book of short stories

from an unknown writer – or that book of lyrical poems that only sixty people are going to buy, to not end up on a spreadsheet. I see funding not as compromising us, but as freeing us up to make choices separate from economic concerns. We have books that we expect to make money – like Bourrie’s *Bush Runner*, that is a piece of important Canadian history. We knew it will make money. We publish our literary lists because we want to work on them; we believe in them as literary objects. We believe in their literary value. Funding does not cause us to compromise our judgement. The funding ensures we can do more and better. This is a non-Metcalfian position. What we have done together is in part because of the funding we have received. You could be the kind of publisher that says, "we got Canadian funding so we will only publish Canadian books." We do not operate that way. A lot of people want to talk about these funding models as detrimental to the kind of literature we are producing – it can result in a lot of crap being published, but I do not think this is the case with us.

Your first book, Salvatore Ala’s Straight Razor, won an Alcuin Society Award for Excellence in Book Design in Canada. Can you say something about the decision to produce a beautiful book, the financial risk involved, and the extent to which you made back your money?

For Ala’s *Straight Razor*, we almost certainly did not make our money back. That was the first book we ever produced. I walked around with it like a baby for a week when the first box of books arrived at the old bookshop on Ouellette. The staff just stopped and celebrated for days. It was not about making our money back. We spent a year designing that book and we printed at Gaspereau, even though it cost us far too much money to do so. We could not have survived doing that for every book. We did it for the first few. I still stand by the design quality of our books and many of the choices we make for production are better than all but the artisan presses.

We had to choose what kind of publisher we were going to be. Unless we were going to print our own books, there was no way to maintain that level of production.

If you look at some of the earlier books we published in 2004 and 2005, our books fifteen years later are cheaper. \$28.95 on David Helwig's *Saltsea* was a break-even point without funding. We were receiving no funding at the time we published it. The only way to break-even was to charge a higher price, but that meant that no one bought the book. We can either be artisanal publishers who reach a very limited audience, or we can be a publisher who has to sacrifice some design aspects of a book to reach a wider audience. That is the kind of publisher we decided we wanted to be.

What was your most profitable book?

My guess is that it was *From the Vault: A Photo-History of London to 1950*. It sold thirteen thousand copies and I sold so many directly, with no discount.

But the most revenue generating was probably Ellmann's *Ducks Newburyport* that sold fifty thousand copies. Our non-fiction is far more profitable than our literary fiction. A lot of our regional titles sell well.

After eighteen years as a publisher, if you could take something back, perhaps something that gave direction to the press, what would it be?

Personally, I would be less anxious about things. John's advice from the get-go – the two pieces of editorial advice he gave, was to "trust your gut" and "do not be afraid to look stupid." I still struggle with these things, but I am much better now at trusting my gut. I think if I trusted it

more and earlier, we would have been even better off. I feel incredibly lucky. Next year, it will be a quarter-century of living in books. July 1998, that first bookshop opened. Twenty-five years as a bookseller has been a wonderful life. We have only been comfortable for three or four years. If Ellmann's book had bombed in 2019, we would have been in trouble. Even when it was on the Booker list, things could have gone wrong. That anxiety can lead to a siege mentality, and I wish I gave in a little less to that and enjoyed the ride a little more. There are books I wish I had published, there are books I wish I would have rejected, but overall, I am proud. We can only be loyal to a writer through their books. I think of many of these authors as my friends, but if I do not believe in their book, I cannot do a good job.

If you could give someone ten Biblioasis books that best sum up what you've accomplished with the press, what would they be?

These are not necessarily my favourite books, but they represent the press. Do not hold me to these books because they are ones I thought of on the spot. I would say Alexander MacLeod's *Light Lifting*, Lucy Ellmann's *Ducks Newburyport*, Clark Blaise's *Selected Stories* (an upcoming book), K.D. Miller's *All Saints*, Anakana Schofield's *Martin John*, Catherine Leroux's *The Party Wall*, Amanda Jernigan's *Years, Months, and Days* . . . this is hard. Mark Bourrie's *The Bush Runner*, to cover Canadian history. This is the thing – here I am defending my choices, but our list is very wide-ranging. If I am trying to reflect the whole list . . . I better include something by John. I don't know if I should include *An Aesthetic Underground* or his fiction, but I will go with John Metcalf's *An Aesthetic Underground* because it was so important – without it, we would be in different shape. It can represent our Reprint Series. Number ten . . . what do you think should be there?

I am surprised you did not include Ala's Straight Razor.

I do not like choosing ten at all. I mean, it was our first book, and it was a very important book to do. It got us started. Let's go with Salvatore Ala's *Straight Razor*. It maybe not the book we are known for, but it is local and was important for the press. I am pulling ten books from our three hundred books. I refuse to be held to this list that I came up with on the spot with none of my books to look at [laughs].

CONCLUSION

In 2005, Biblioasis began publishing books for a wider audience, believing that great literature has no national borders, concentrating on formal poetry, literary criticism, short stories, international translations, commercial titles, and non-fiction works. The press has won many literary awards throughout the years. Ala's *Straight Razor* was the first book Biblioasis published, kickstarting their legacy as a small, indie Canadian publishing house. Larger publishing houses like Macmillan, McClelland & Stewart, University of Toronto Press, and Oxford University Press started the English-Canadian modern era of publishing, but Canadian presses primarily told American and British stories or published textbooks to stay afloat until the 1950s. Experimental Canadian works still pose a high financial risk. Wells always considered the American and international literary scene as Biblioasis' location in Windsor, Ontario borders Detroit. Metcalf and Wells wanted readers to see Biblioasis' logo and know what to expect – they built a character for the press and established a brand identity. Even if readers do not recognize an author's name on their books, they will be familiar with the standard and quality Biblioasis publications uphold. Smaller publishing houses normally publish one genre or style of book so they can avoid marketing each new release, which could pose an additional financial burden. Moreover, if readers know what kind of books a press regularly releases, they establish a reputation – or personality, according to Metcalf. Biblioasis functions as an extension of Metcalf's legacy at Porcupine's Quill, bringing many Porcupine's Quill writers to Biblioasis such as Clark Blaise, C.H. Gervais (or Marty Gervais), Terry Griggs, David Helwig, Steven Henighan, Hugh Hood, Amanda Jernigan, Norman Levine, K.D. Miller, Eric Ormsby, P.K. Page, Leon Rooke, Patricia Robertson, Robyn Sarah, Russell Smith, Zachariah Wells, and Metcalf himself. These already established writers helped make Biblioasis' reputation credible from the

start. Wells' past as a bookseller is a great asset for the press and the bookshop; his excellent interpersonal skills allow him to directly interact with customers and figure out what they desire from the press and bookshop. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Wells contemplated closing the bookstore, but after working there during the Ontario-wide lockdowns, he was able to pinpoint what was working well and where resources were wasted. Now, the bookshop is thriving more than ever – both financially and socially. The press is going strong and continues to publish financially riskier works to tell Canadian stories multi-national presses won't touch.

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