

In Columbus's wake

Exploring language without going over the edge

The Accidental Indies

By Robert Finley

McGill-Queen's University Press,
128 pp, \$27.95

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Special to The Gazette

The *Accidental Indies*, Robert Finley's first book, is an intensely metaphoric meditation on language, memory, dreams and the explorer Christopher Columbus. In its relatively few pages of poetical prose, it manages a linguistic denseness and an imaginative expansiveness that few other works approach.

The story begins with the infant Columbus under the care of his unfortunately inattentive nursemaid. Dazzled by light and sun motes, our young adventurer tumbles out of his crib and thus tests for the first time, but certainly not the last, the "heft and roundness of this world against his infant head."

We then get a rather selective and idiosyncratic account of Columbus's first journey, aboard the *Niña*, *Pinta* and *Santa Maria*, to a world entirely dependent on Columbus's impatient imagination and abundant ambitions.

The story of this journey is not, nor could it ever be, a documentary on Columbus's watery adventures. Fin-

ley's book is much more in the spirit of Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter*, about jazzman Buddy Bolden, or Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*, which entirely recasts for our contemporary imaginations the life and vagaries of another era.

We travel in *The Accidental Indies* along the "Coast of Contradictions," through a "Sea of Allegory," perhaps toward an "island of arrival." This journey is between the Old World and the New but it is also "the journey of an idea outward into language."

Columbus's great strength is not so much that he has been able to convince Ferdinand and Isabella to provide him moral and financial support, but rather that he is a "literalist of the imagination." He takes his ignorance and dreams and turns them into charts and letters for the unbelievers.

"He sees that the sea is pure verb, and our voyages across it take on a certain shape, a certain pattern which is the pattern of our thought and speech." In this passage Finley is describing Janus, the "two-faced god of this voyage," but he could be just as easily talking about Columbus or indeed his own writing of this book.

Read this short book and then read it again so that you can begin filling in all the marginalia that you missed the

first time: the "fantasies – grotesques – titillations and taboos." *The Accidental Indies* is a work of adventure and exploration, about Columbus certainly, but also about how storytelling and language fills out but never replaces our metaphors and our own travels.

Columbus's fellow sailors bring back from their travels parrots and potatoes, for example, but they also bring back other tokens cocooned in sails and winding through blood: "the silent spirilla of stories of unaccountable wealth and cruelty and happiness, of the simple life, and of 'aunciente libertie,' branch across their palms and wait to be told."

Finley was born in Halifax and is now teaching at the Université Ste. Anne in the heart of Acadia. He is a word crafter and a serendipitous thinker to be savoured and reckoned with. Evoking the resilient visions of Columbus and encouraging the reader along in the adventure, Finley has given us a new world of discovery and language. It's a first book that reads as though Finley has been writing and pondering oceanic and linguistic adventures for a very long time.

❖ Peter O'Brien is a Toronto editor and writer. He is the co-author of *Build a Better Book Club*.



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