

New Quebec fiction deserves wider audience

*Governor-General's Award-winners
take a crack at anglo markets.*

THE INDISCERNIBLE MOVEMENT

By Aude

Translated by Jill Cairns
Exile, 111 pages, \$17.95

ONE BEAUTIFUL DAY TO COME

By Robert Lalonde

Translated by Neil B. Bishop
Ekstasis, 131 pages, \$16.95

REVIEWED BY PETER O'BRIEN

Both Aude and Robert Lalonde have won the Governor-General's Award for Fiction in French (Aude in 1997 for this work, Lalonde in 1994 for *Le Petit Aigle à tête blanche*), yet they remain inexcusably and lamentably little known in English Canada.

Although Lalonde has been translated previously into English, this is the first time for the enigmatic Aude (the pseudonym of a reclusive Quebec City writer named Claudette Charbonneau-Tissot). The 13 haunting stories of *The Indiscernible Movement*, in an effortless and compelling translation by Jill Cairns, are nothing short of remarkable. Several of them, including *The Ferryman*, *Poppies*, *Crate from Kyoto* and the story from which the title of the collection is taken are close to perfect. They deserve to be both widely read and anthologized.

Aude's brief parables, clothed in language that never veers toward

the sentimental, provide fleeting glimpses into mostly marginalized characters: a rebellious adolescent, a man enclosed in a Kafkaesque prison or asylum, a mother who has almost smothered her daughter with love, a barely coherent drunk all but lost in a foreign country.

In the opening story, *Everything is Here*, a man survives a prison camp by playing an intricate card game with fellow inmates and learning Tai Chi movements from the older ones. Everything he needs "to protect, cover, nourish, amuse and take care of" himself can be imagined into existence, even in the midst of the filth and squalor of his surroundings.

In *The Camille Period*, a painter named Thomas talks about one of his works: "The unstable boundary between imminent attraction or repulsion gave the painting an almost unbearable intensity." The same could be said of this powerful collection.

Lalonde's novella is as lush and poetical as Aude's stories are crystalline and prickly. *One Beautiful Day to Come*, in a fine if sometimes workmanlike translation by Neil Bishop, dashes back and forth through time to recall or reimagine birth and childhood. Lalonde's exultant language all but bursts forth on the page as it attempts to capture "what makes life so dear, so reckless, so fragile, so enigmatic, so sure of itself, so urgent, so beautiful."

The setting is a small village "at the end of the world, surrounded by water." The speaker of the book imagines his own birth from the time his parents marry, as well as the birth of his own child and the lives of other characters, some long dead and some still living through the "spells, tragedies and radiant mysteries" that inform these layered pages.

At times the book is almost too laden with its ambitious desire to articulate the mysteries of sex, birth, love, God, limbo, death and other monumental topics. But it is so endearing, so desirous of capturing what is impossible to capture, that the reader can't help but be swept along in its enthusiasm and optimism. "Childhood, inextricably, mixes life and death, the ephemeral and the eternal, sad bedrooms and marvellous gardens," Lalonde writes. This book attempts a similar grand, interwoven vision. If it does not always have the "splendid violence of a newly steaming volcano," at least it makes the effort.

The publishers responsible for these two books deserve to be supported for the often thankless task of translating what may appear to most English readers to be minor French writers. There are, of course, many well known and established Québécois writers in translation, but these two books are a strong and welcome sign of the rich legacy currently being produced by other French-Canadian authors. Who knows how many remain untranslated?

♦ ♦ ♦

Peter O'Brien co-edited Fatal Recurrences: New Fiction in English from Montreal. His most recent book is Build a Better Book Club, co-authored with Harry Heft.