

SATURDAY, JULY 3, 1999

One over the top, one far below it

THE LONG DRIVE HOME

By Stan Rogal
Insomniac Press,
177 pages, \$18.99

HUSH

By Anne Stone
Insomniac Press,
150 pages, \$18.99

REVIEWED BY PETER O'BRIEN

Both of these short novels suffer under the weight and stigma of information. Stan Rogal's *The Long Drive Home* is burdened by a surfeit of facts, random conversations and a story that desperately wants to connect all the dots. Anne Stone's *Hush* is so sparingly told, so bereft of storyline, that the back-cover blurb, telling the reader the few bare bones of the book's plot, is essential reading.

Poet and short-story writer Rogal has had plays produced across Canada and is the co-artistic director of the Bald Ego theatre company in Toronto. *The Long Drive Home*, despite being essentially a road novel, reads like a play: lots of dialogue to advance the action, an assortment of random characters and actions that slowly intertwine themselves into a central climax —

with enough gun play and sex to keep the audience more or less interested.

The story brings together two aging hitmen for one last job, an autistic girl and her troubled parents, and a small cast of others, all connected by affairs of the heart or gonads, or guns. Throughout, there are mundane snatches — about salads, new country versus soft rock, number theory and travel brochures. As the action moves toward its final explosion at a roadside motel in Magog, Que., I found myself guided almost too precisely to exactly where Rogal wanted me.

There are as well some provocative and frenetic scenes — at its best, the writing is jittery and staccato — but I would have preferred a little less thematic teasing and a bit more left unsaid.

At one point, one of the characters asks another: "Are you still working on the 'novel slash screenplay' that's gonna make you rich?" This novel is unlikely to make Rogal rich, but should the movie ever come out it will probably have a large following. There's enough gun fetishism, sex of various permutations and quirky action scenes to pull in the audiences.

Hush, by Montreal writer and performance artist Anne Stone, is as selective with its storyline as Rogal's book is blatant. It is a portrait, says the back-cover blurb, of the "murky vision and dulled sense" that result from secrets and deception over the generations. That's putting it mildly.

I found the book almost impossible to read as Stone has presented it and, instead, found myself skipping randomly among its short, poetical chapters. The "monsterhead

named love" trails behind Roses De'ath, the central tormented soul of this book, "fat with scraps and debris it swept from Roses's mind: the crumbs on the tabletop, the cut-out silhouettes of dancing footprints, an empty envelope. Love had no notion of time, didn't obey the demands of chronological narrative, but stole, indiscriminately, from the future as well as the past."

The crumbs and silhouettes that Stone give the reader revolve around the sordid history of De'ath Sound, a town named for Roses's mother, set in the lower townships of English Quebec. The other characters include Loralie, the local prostitute who seems to gather much of the violence and disturbance throughout these pages, and Potter, Roses's biological father, who is a dwarf and an outcast because of his deformed "bird-leg." Roses at one point talks about the "scars and bruises" burned in the brain of one of the other men in her life. The book leaves the same sort of troubling aftereffects in the memories of the reader.

At times, *Hush* presents crystalline shards of richly distilled language, steeped in memory, personal history and evocation of the world gone awry. At other times, the reader is left wanting just a few more slivers of story in order to permit either the sympathy or disgust that seems relevant. The mind of the reader cannot live so completely on hints and clouded memories.

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Peter O'Brien edited the Montreal literary and art journal *Rubicon*. He is co-author, with Harry Heft, of *Build a Better Book Club*.