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Book reviews

The Hamilton Spectator
(Apr 15, 2006)

An Inverted Sort Of Prayer

By Chris F. Needham

(Now or Never Publishing,
\$21.95)

Reviewed by GARY CURTIS

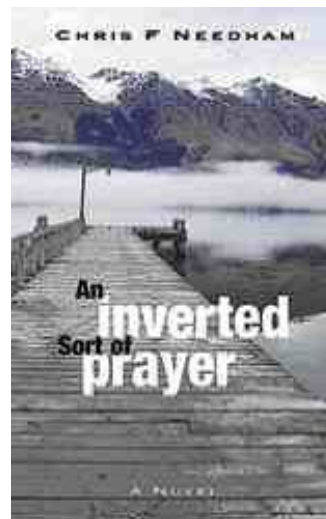
There's a pretty good book in An Inverted Sort Of Prayer, the debut work of Vancouver novelist Chris F. Needham.

There are all kinds of tough-edged observations and rough-hewn takes on reality and three or four brilliantly penned and lengthy screeds -- any of which could be taken from this novel to stand alone as an essay.

And there's a thoughtful, incisive, deeply flawed major character, Billy Purdy, who's finishing up a lengthy National Hockey League career. He's the No. 1 enforcer (or "tough guy" or goon) in the league, and he's prolonged his already-lengthy career by years through the judicious (and then not so judicious) application of steroids.

He also fairly bathes himself in liquor of all kinds, and has done so since his days in Major A. He doesn't like women so very much; and it's apparent he doesn't think so highly of himself either.

There's but one flaw to An Inverted Sort Of Prayer; writer Needham takes us around the world to drink excessively with



An Inverted Sort Of Prayer

Don't know
what to
make for
Dinner?

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Billy and buddies, all to no avail except to see the pages fly by. There has to be some writerly device Needham could've called upon to render the same effect, but without the ennui.

The story is this: Billy in the twilight of his career is toiling with Mannheim of the German league when he comes upon bartender Chris, wastrel son of an ex-Canadian prime minister.

It seems Chris has been following Billy around for a while; and when Billy's contract is bought by the Vancouver Canucks for a spirited playoff drive, Billy finds that Chris has installed himself on the West Coast also.

Chris' secret is this: he's plagiarized a book written some 40 years previous by Billy's father, and it's due out soon and it's making a big splash.

(What's with Vancouver writers and plagiarism? Barry Kennedy's recent *Rock Varnish* dealt with the same theme).

An Inverted Sort Of Prayer comes down to this: Billy is an honourable man. He lives by a set of codes and he expects others to do the same.

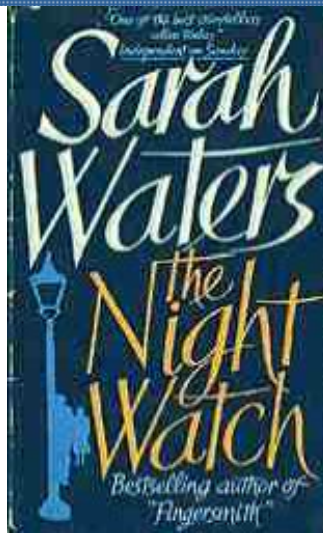
When he fights on the ice, it's within a rigidly prescribed code; and his initial undoing comes when a rival player steps outside the code, causing Billy to lose his grip.

Much later, when Billy comes to see a parallel between what he did on ice, under those bright lights, and what it's like in the brutish but also codified world of the bull ring, it so happens that the code does not kick in for Billy. The expected brutal grace, the balletic thrust and parry, the parallel that Billy needed to see, is once again not there.

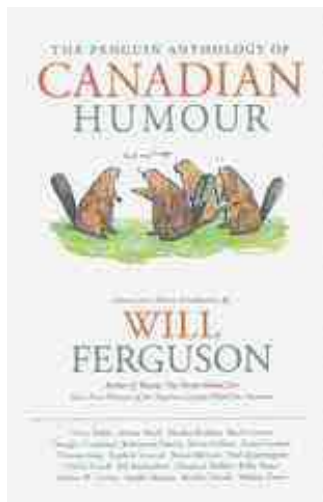
And there's one final instance in which the code is called upon, and it's not pretty. But, hey, someone has to lace 'em up, step up and let 'em fly.

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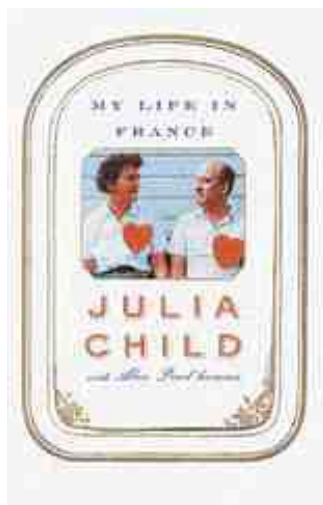
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The Night Watch



Penguin Anthology of Canadian Humour



My Life in France

The Night Watch

By Sarah Waters

(Virago, \$39)

Reviewed By STEVE MURRAY

Best known for her Victorian pastiches Tipping the Velvet and Fingersmith -- deft, page-turning novels equally notable for their clockwork plotting and their lesbian friskiness -- Sarah Waters moves into the 20th century and slows the pace, to good effect, in *The Night Watch*.

Set in the years during and after the Second World War in London, the book unfolds in counter-chronological order: First 1947, then 1944 and finally 1941. What might look like a literary stunt instead gives *The Night Watch* a lyrically mournful tone as we first meet the novel's five main characters in the uncertain, oddly bleak time after the war, only later discovering who they were (and what linked their lives) in the harrowing days of the Blitz.

In 1947, Kay is a former heroine who's now seen as a kind of joke. No longer the woman who drove a van and nursed victims of German bombings, or collected their corpses, she's taunted for wearing men's clothing. The gender-equalizing days of wartime are gone.

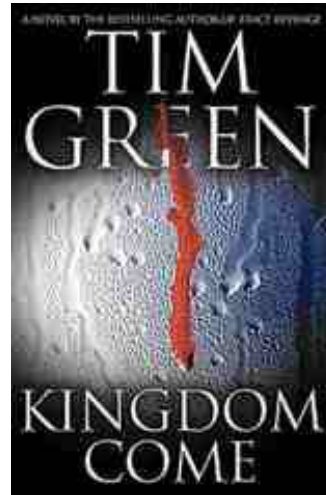
Helen works at a matchmaking service, an ironic occupation, since her relationship with Julia, a writer, is unravelling -- mainly through her obsessive fears Julia is cheating on her.

Helen's co-worker Viv has love problems of her own. Her longtime, hot-sheet affair with the former soldier Reggie feels like a dying thing: He's married with kids. And Viv's brother Duncan, now working a lowly factory job, is haunted by a prison sentence and a tragedy in his past that makes him recall a kitchen smeared with blood.

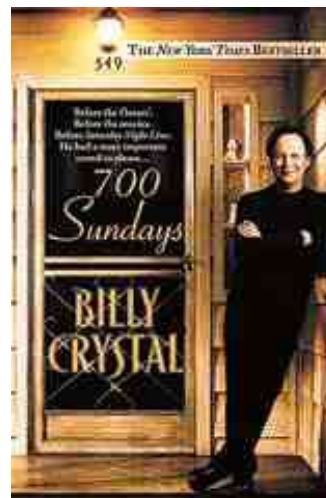
Why was he in jail? How did Viv meet Reggie? And what is Kay's relationship to the rest of the characters? Those questions -- and the hints dropped in the 1947 section of the book -- are what give *The Night Watch* its



Sexploration: The Ultimate Guide to Feeling Truly Great in Bed



Kingdom Come



700 Sundays

unusual form of suspense.

We know these people survived the war. What we don't know is how they did and how it changed them.

Waters gradually reveals chains of connection among her characters, exposing how people who realize they could die overnight, in a flashing blast of steel, brick and fire, learn to connect unexpectedly and live as fully as they can. And how, sometimes, they also make terrible mistakes that echo through the years.

As usual, Waters' historical research and keen eye for detail are present on virtually every page -- whether she's summoning up the smelly clamour and panic of a prison cell during an air raid or describing the oddly ghostlike nighttime streets of London, with all the city's windows blacked out. *The Night Watch* isn't as rip-roaringly fun or romantic as Waters' previous novels. In fact, it's often very sad. But it confirms that the author is more than a good writer honing a single trick.

Abandoning the familiar stomping grounds of her 19th-century heroines, she discovers deeper emotion in London's blasted streets.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Penguin Anthology of Canadian Humour

Edited by Will Ferguson

(Viking Canada, \$32)

Reviewed by Moira L. MacKinnon

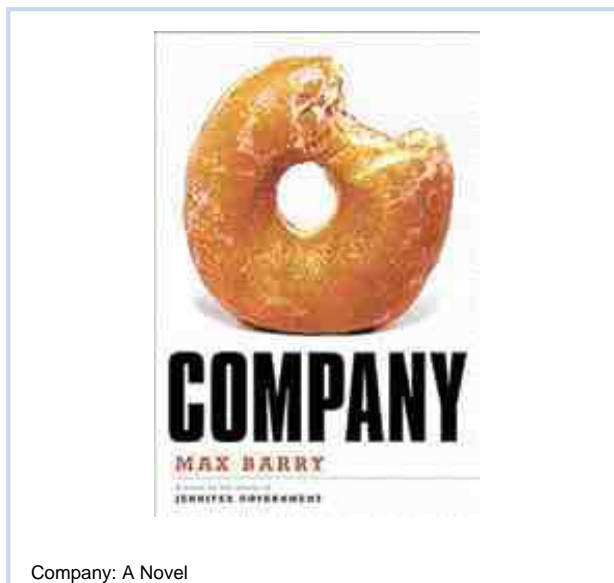
Anthologies are like salads. You take a lot of ingredients you think will go well together, shake them all up, add a bit of vinaigrette or salad dressing, and serve.

Some people will eat the whole thing, while others might pick out the radishes or the raisins. As the chef, you just have to hope that more people will eat your whole salad than pick at it.

You can't discuss Canadian humour without talking about Stephen Leacock. As our best known humourist, he has become the yardstick by which all Canadian humour is measured. Successful humourists are judged by the number of Leacock Medals they have won.

According to Leacock, the origins of humour lie in the contrasts of life, and in the incongruity between our aspirations and our achievements.

It is that gap between expectation and accomplishment that Will Ferguson has mined to bring together this collection.



Company: A Novel



A well-known humourist and two-time Stephen Leacock Medal winner, Will Ferguson is co-author, with his brother Ian, of *How to Be a Canadian*, and author of *Canadian History for Dummies*, *Why I Hate Canadians*, and *Beauty Tips From Moose Jaw*, to name a few.

He has spread his net wide, from B to W, to find the funniest Canadian writers to include.

(This leaves an obvious opening for future humourists whose names begin with A, X, Y or Z.)

All the usual suspects are included, such as Robertson Davies, Stephen Leacock, Mordecai Richler, Robert W. Service, Miriam Toews, Stuart McLean, and Douglas Coupland.

But there are also a number of lesser known writers such as Dave Bidini, Antanas Sileika, and Mariko Tamaki.

As might be expected, some of the funniest entries are by those grand old men of Canadian literature, Leacock, Davies and Service.

But I found myself guffawing equally loudly at Bob Edwards' *Sample Debate in the Canadian House of Commons*, and *Chronology of a Crisis, Vancouver-Island Style*, by Jack Knox.

Women are well-represented by Marsha Boulton's *Talking Turkey and Kiss a Pig for a Cause*, selections from Ivan E. Coyote's *One Man's Trash and Close to Spider Man*, M.A.C. Farrant's *The HeartSpeak Wellness Retreat*, and Patricia Pearson's *Playing House*, among many.

The average reader, if there is such a creature, will find most of the entries in this anthology chuckle-and-snort funny, with a few bringing on a full out-loud guffaw and laugh.

A few, such as David Rakoff's *Before and After Science*, and W.P. Kinsella's *Indian Joe*, while excellently written, might be puzzling for their inclusion.

Both Rakoff and Kinsella have more of a sense of pathos than humour, at least to this reader.

Overall, though, it's a salad to savour.

My Life in France

By Julia Child with Alex Prud'homme

(Knopf, \$35.95)

Reviewed by John Skoyles

Julia Child's memoir *My Life in France* is a love story: a couple's love for each other, and Child's love for a country and its cuisine.

The book is not so much written as it is told, as her grandnephew and co-author, Alex Prud'homme, has put together these autobiographical stories from his conversations with her as well as from the numerous letters written by Child (who died in 2004) and her husband when they lived in France.

The result captures her charm, warmth and, above all, her determined and robust spirit.

Julia Child has become such a culinary icon that it is surprising to learn she came from a family of ordinary cooks. She says, "As a girl I had zero interest in the stove."

The book begins and ends with her recalling her first meal upon arriving in France in 1948. The dish was sole meuniere, "a large, flat Dover sole that was perfectly browned ..." She refers to this as a "life-changing experience."

In France, she gleefully recounts the rarified expertise of chefs and purveyors of meats, fish, cheeses, fruits and vegetables. In a creamery, the owner asks her what time the Camembert she orders will be served -- and Child marvels at the woman's "ability to calibrate a cheese's readiness down to the hour."

But *My Life in France* is more than an account of her increasing obsession with food. The book tracks her marriage to Paul Child, his work for the U.S. State Department, and their struggle to make a life together abroad. She traces her growth as a cook, but links it to the jobs they held, and family and friends, so there is a human backdrop to her culinary saga.

A major theme is the story of the writing of her groundbreaking book, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. After years of research and rejection, it was published in 1961 to universal acclaim. On receiving a deeply disappointing negative response from a major publisher who had encouraged her, she writes:

"I wasn't feeling sorry for myself. I had gotten the job done, I was proud of it ... Besides, I had found myself through the arduous writing process. Even if we were never able to publish our book, I had discovered my *raison d'etre* in life."

This touching moment is described without self-pity and almost heroic determination.

The great achievement of *My Life in France* is that Prud'homme captured Child's voice. Anyone who has heard her on television will immediately recognize the frank, jovial and embracing tone.

He brings to life her self-effacing character, and her generosity toward others, but also another, even rarer quality -- her extraordinary cheerfulness. She comes across as a truly optimistic person, accepting life's reversals and pitfalls without complaint, and one feels that this optimism has somehow resulted in things turning out for the best. We hear Julia Child with all the intimacy and warmth with which she spoke to her family and friends.

Sexploration: The Ultimate Guide to Feeling Truly Great in Bed

By Jane Bogart

(Penguin, \$21)

Reviewed by Andrea Robinson

With a theme that sexuality is diverse, personal and positive, *Sexploration* gets the message across that getting your freak on does not classify you as a deviant.

In this book, an attitude of acceptance is applied to everything from body image to child sexuality to eroticism -- with partner(s) or alone.

Author Bogart achieves her goal of obliterating taboo with candid testimonials and anecdotes from people of all ages, gender and sexual orientation.

The "how to" portion of this book is complete with lessons in physiology expressed with some of Bogart's rather primitive but humorously quirky illustrations of esthetically differing genitals.

This works to reassure readers that what we think is physically desirable is actually derived from the unreality of TV and print media -- as well as the improbable shapes and sizes found in pornography.

This book is particularly effective, fun and relevant due to its interactive style -- prompting the reader to answer intimate questions and draw explicit pictures in provided spaces.

Regardless of how you perceive your aptitude in bed -- sexually savvy or simple -- *Sexploration* offers an entertaining and informative survey of sex that will boost confidence and enjoyment under the covers.

Kingdom Come

By Tim Green

(Warner, \$33.95)

Reviewed by John McKay

First of all, readers beware. This is a corporate crime thriller with no heroes, but plenty of bad guys.

Also (no spoiler here) author Green has opted to open his story near the end, with the admission that our "hero" is not only crooked, but a murderer. Worse yet, he's not very bright, at least not at committing crime.

We are introduced to Thane as he is confessing to a prison psychologist. The narrative switches between third person and first.

Thane has become powerful and wealthy on the coattails of his billionaire developer friend Bob King, whose latest construction project is a huge mall complex in upper New York state. The whole enterprise is mired in corruption and the bodies begin piling up.

This is where Thane's stupidity kicks in, pushed on by his Lady Macbeth of a wife, the beautiful but deadly Jessica.

Soon the FBI is on his trail, since they've already had people on the inside for years trying to bring down the crooked union.

So there's no sympathy for the ultra-greedy Thane and Jessica, who already have enough wealth to down the finest wines for dinner and fly corporate jets to the Caribbean on a whim.

It's also no surprise that their downfall is imminent. The reader is left to plug away, waiting to see just how the inevitable will come to pass.

The narrative remains compelling enough, but for many it may be difficult having such an anti-hero as their guide through this unsavoury exploration of how power and money corrupts the soul.

700 Sundays

By Billy Crystal

(H.B. Fenn, \$29.95)

Reviewed by Stewart Brown

This warm and humorous autobiography by American actor/comedian Billy Crystal gets its title from the number of Sundays he had with his father, Jack, who died when Crystal was 15. As such, it's a "thanks for the memories" book.

Crystal, now 58, grew up Jewish in a jazz loving household on Long Island. His dad managed the Commodore Music Shop on 42nd Street in Manhattan, a jazz institution, after an uncle, Milt Gabler, began recording Dixieland and swing musicians and introduced mail-order delivery of the 78 rpm discs.

Jazz greats such as Willie "The Lion" Smith, Wild Bill Davidson, Zutty Singleton, Eddie Condon and Roy Eldridge were frequent visitors to the Commodore and the Crystal home, much to the delight of Billy and his two older brothers.

When Billy, at eight, saw his first Yankee doubleheader, he and his dad used Louis Armstrong's tickets. When Crystal saw his first movie, Shane, he sat in Billie Holiday's lap. This book, the basis for Crystal's Tony Award-winning, one-man show on Broadway (and in Toronto) last year, radiates happiness.

"Heroes don't have to be public figures of any kind. Heroes are right in your family," Crystal writes. "There's amazing stories in all of our families. You just have to ask, 'and then what happened?'"

700 Sundays celebrates family, right down to trademark Crystal jokes. "Jews bury very quickly. Very quickly. I had an uncle who was a narcoleptic and he'd doze off and you'd hear digging. One summer they buried him five times."

Company: A Novel

By Max Barry

(Doubleday, \$32.95)

Reviewed by Anne Boles Levy

It's a serf-eat-serf world in the cubicles these days, as Stephen Jones quickly learns at Seattle-based Zephyr Holdings.

Jones is a recent college grad. His first assignment is to investigate a purloined doughnut, while more seasoned sales assistants tackle such heady tasks as fudging expense accounts or overusing the company gym.

Jones learns to navigate the rat race that winds through the maze of cubicles as it does in any office where the bosses randomly downsize the cheese. That is, until Jones makes the mistake of asking what Zephyr Holdings actually does.

Nobody knows. What's more, they don't care. They're miserable and underpaid, and that's good enough for them. When Jones tries to rouse enthusiasm for an employee coup, his co-workers would rather play strip poker.

But Jones is so fresh his fellow employees' cynicism hasn't rubbed off on him yet. So he sets off to discover how the company makes money.

While the management line to the workers is simply that they are "creating shareholder value," in reality they publish draconian management handbooks and his co-workers are the lab rats.

Uncovering the secret gets him ushered into the company's inner sanctum, where he's torn between the slathering greed of the boardroom and loyalty to co-workers he barely knows.

But don't expect anybody to root for senior management, who get what they deserve, plus stock options, of course.

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