Needham, Chris F.
FALLING FROM HEIGHTS
Now Or Never Publishing
(320 pp.)
$17.95 paperback
July 15, 2007
ISBN: 978-0-9739558-1-1

A prodigal son delves into a trove of family secrets in this saga of cross-generational angst.

Jeremy Jacks, failed writer of brutally misogynist novels, returns from Toronto to Vancouver when his army-reservist brother Robert is injured in a parachuting accident. Home is the last place the sulky 29-year-old man-boy wants to be. He must suffer the scorn of his father, Jon, a cantankerous ex-fisherman and alcoholic, cope with Robert's growing violence and instability, work a hellish job at a fish-feed mill and shudder through visits with his much older brother, Jon Jr., a creepy sex offender living under permanent house arrest. At first, Canadian novelist Needham (*An Inverted Sort of Prayer*) festoons Jeremy's story with hipster-lit tics. There's plenty of urban anomie as he prowls the not-really-so-mean streets of Vancouver, where "a feeling of dread hangs in the air...a silent scream of cast-aside dreams." And the characters fairly radiate quirkiness—"Jon Jacks, it can with certainty be said, had become at some uncertain point entirely allergic to bread" observed in a smugly deadpan prose that's needlessly overwritten with arch curlicues. But a new voice intrudes when Jeremy discovers a cache of 30-year-old letters written in 1972 by his Aunt Birdie, then a young woman participating in a medical study of marijuana. Voluntarily immured in a hospital with 19 other women, she is (very voluntarily) made to smoke a good deal of pot; she otherwise fills her days weaving belts, obsessing over her constipation and soaking up the world through media. Despite her cloistered surroundings, Birdie's letters give the story a fresh, direct tone and gradually shed light on the unexpected origins of the family's dysfunctions. Under her influence, Jeremy's contemporary narrative starts to lose its showy irony and grow in sincerity and depth.

After a rocky start, Needham hits his stride with an affecting drama.

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