

BOB

backofthebook.ca

Canada's online magazine

Arts & Books

Sunday, February 10, 2008



RSS

Arts & Books Archives

[January 2007](#)

[February 2007](#)

[April 2007](#) [May](#)

[2007](#) [June 2007](#)

[August 2007](#)

[September 2007](#)

[October 2007](#)

[November 2007](#)

[February 2008](#)

Rising to Heights

FALLING FROM HEIGHTS

By Chris F. Needham

Now or Never Publishing

310 pp., \$21.95

Review by Frank Moher

Falling from Heights is the kind of novel that book reviewers live for (or at least this one does); ambitious, largely successful in its ambitions, engaging, and seeming to come out of nowhere.

In fact, it comes from a small publisher, Now or Never, in Delta, B.C. -- but the book makes a pretty good case that Delta, like many suburbs, is as close to nowhere as one can get. Author Chris F. Needham paints it as the sort of spiritually blank landscape that Kevin Smith's New Jerseyites would find familiar, but in language so gorgeous it'd give Silent Bob the heebie-jeebies. It is, his narrator tells us, "a hodgepodge of aging, oddly homogenous homes connected one to the others via the elevated arteries of power lines and the underground gossip and general malaise of their inhabitants."

Just who the narrator is turns out to be one the novel's many splendid involutions -- suffice it to say that he's about as unreliable as unreliable narrators get. As *Falling from Heights* opens, its moody central character, Jeremy, has returned home from a failed bid at a writing career in Toronto. He thinks he's back for his brother's funeral; the fact that his brother turns out to be robustly alive, and more out-of-control than ever, only increases his conviction that he was right to leave in the first place. Meanwhile, in alternating sequences, we read the 30-year old letters home of a young woman, Birdie Cormack, involved in a Toronto study on the effects of marijuana. Both are stuck in place: Birdie literally, at the hospital where the study takes place, Jeremy in a family (including another brother permanently incarcerated as a sex predator and described as "sort of a cross between Rainman and Hannibal Lecter") that is nearly hallucinatory in its determined dysfunction.

Again, what the two stories have to do with each other becomes clear only gradually. Meantime, we are treated to Needham's keen, voluptuously-rendered account of what it is to be young, self-aware, and out of prospects, not to mention some mordantly funny cameos.



One, of a boozy, grandiloquent actor apparently based on transplanted Vancouverite Michael Moriarty, eschews cheap shots in favour of something more like sympathy; by the novel's end, "Calvin Cassidy" is just another of the flotsam washed-up in his favourite bar. The other is an indirect appearance by a successful author named Ferguson Henry, whose career is strangely analogous with real-life author Will Ferguson, and who functions as a billyclub for Jeremy's agent to beat him with.

This leads, as Jeremy leaves his agent's office, to another of the novel's mellifluous riffs on the intersection of soul and city: "With the summer sun out and the distant blue mountains sharply defined against a brighter blue sky, Jeremy was treated to an obscure run of third class, twenty-dollar hookers and their hazy, heroin-addicted associates, each of which, as Jeremy passed, measured him with a shrewd ironic eye worthy perhaps of the talented and prolific, yet domestically misunderstood, Ferguson Henry himself."

Falling from Heights could be less discursive; the connections made and secrets revealed at the end don't quite justify its length. But a novel this rewarding and sophisticated deserves a lot more attention than it's received so far. Reading it is like coming across a great restaurant in a suburban strip mall; you're delighted both by the experience and the fact that later you'll be able to tell others about it.

Consider yourself told.

[Buy it now](#)

Labels: [Chris F. Needham](#), [Falling from Heights](#), [Now or Never Publishing](#)

[permalink](#)  

[0 Comments](#) [Links to this post](#)   [0 comments](#)

0 Comments:

[Post a Comment](#)

Wednesday, November 28, 2007

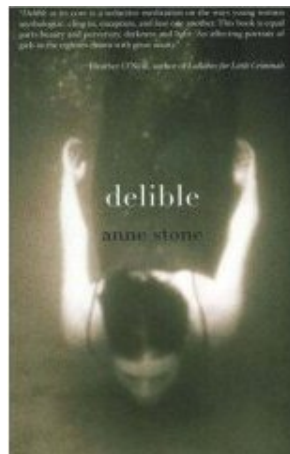
Lost and not found

DELIBLE

By Anne Stone
Insomniac Press
312 pp., \$21.95

Review by Catherine Nutter

Set in an '80s public housing project in suburban Toronto, *Delible* is a haunting portrait of the grief and loss left in the wake of the disappearance of one of two sisters. Melissa is among thousands of rootless, high-risk kids who go missing each year. Unlike most of them she does not soon return, leaving her sibling, Melora, to deal with the loss of her other self. "I was 15 years old, barely, and Melissa was practically 16 when it happened. But we weren't so far apart as it sounds. Melissa Ann Sprague and Melora Ann Sprague. Melora and Melissa. Our mom named us so that we would sound



alike."

Through shifts in time and point of view, Stone fleshes out the sisters' lives, a childhood in which Dad is represented by empty spaces in the photo album, and in which fear of impending nuclear disaster, and teenage boredom, anger, and frustration, are co-equivalents. The girls get tattoos, drink Southern Comfort from the bottle, and do hot knife hits -- together. But while they hurtle inseparably through life, Lora is left on the safer side of the cusp between childhood and the adult world.

When Mel's belongings are found in a subway station in Islington, they include the coke-bottle-bottom glasses she requires in order to see -- a dead giveaway that she didn't just forget her things in a rush towards a new life. Yet the fact that she had run away before, and attempted to take her own life just a week prior, is seen by police as reason not to thoroughly investigate her disappearance.

And she is, of course, just one of many. "In a period of 18 months," Lora wonders, "six girls vanish from the face of this earth, and their belongings are recovered at either Islington or Kipling or points between, and still they are referred to as runaways?"



Stone captures what is both best and the worst about the teenage psyche -- its resiliency. In the world of these child/women, no expectation of honour or respect is attached to sexuality -- just willing acceptance. Drugs and alcohol stand in for an absent sense of protection. Security is a fantasy.

After a somewhat disjointed passage of three years, *Delible* draws to a close with no definite answer regarding Mel's disappearance -- perhaps a bit too much reality for the reader to bear. It's hard to give up on her, even though all evidence indicates that Mel is never coming back. The reader is forced to cope with not knowing, just as the family must.

The word *delible* is not listed in my pocket dictionary -- it exists only in its opposite form, *indelible* ("of a mark, stain, or feeling unable to be removed or washed away.") But *delible* is exactly what these characters are: too easily washed away.

Labels: [Anne Stone](#), [books](#), [Delible](#), [Insomniac Press](#), [runaways](#)

[permalink](#)  

[0 Comments](#) [Links to this post](#)   [0 comments](#)

0 Comments:

[Post a Comment](#)

[e-mail backofthebook.ca](mailto:backofthebook.ca)

[back to the main page](#)