

Robinson, Eden: *Traplines*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1996, ISBN 0-394-28194-2 Cloth CDN\$ 26.00.

Several months ago, I came across a reference to Eden Robinson's *Traplines* in a *BC Bookworld* interview with W.P. Kinsella. Ever the truth-teller, Kinsella called *Traplines* a "dreadful" book, a dismissal which, as far as Kinsella was concerned, required no further elaboration. Several weeks ago, I heard a British Columbia critic, Lynn van Luven, on CBC Radio citing *Traplines* as one of the more significant books among those by new writers in Canada. Reading the book one soon understands why it can divide its audience.

Each of the four short stories in the collection follows the troubled life of an adolescent central character. Robinson presents a set of different characters in each story, but she creates a common world for those characters to inhabit. She depicts a harsh, unforgiving world brutalized by a violence that shapes the patterns of everyday life. The most disturbing quality of the violence, however, is that it is so routine, a kind of violence that is performed senselessly, without reason or remorse. The victims, not surprisingly, are more often than not children and teenagers, those who are the weakest and most vulnerable. Beatings, murder, and incest take their place as a matter of course in Robinson's world. And the site of such violence is usually the family home.

Taken as a whole, the four stories complement and respond to each other, each one providing another point of entry into settings that are never fully detailed or contextualized. Robinson locates her stories, we learn by inference, in the marginalized villages and towns of BC's northwest coast (one story is set in Vancouver), yet she resists any opportunity to make the physical setting a stronger presence in her stories. This strategy produces a disorienting effect for readers who may already be struggling to negotiate their way through difficult territory. Where are we precisely? readers may well ask. And how do we escape? Robinson is working toward abstraction in her writing, and for this particular work, abstraction serves her purposes well by augmenting or amplifying the dislocation experienced by her characters. The risk, of course, is that readers (such as Kinsella, perhaps) may feel alienated or distanced from that world.

As its title suggests, *Traplines* exploits the metaphors of pursuit and entrapment. In each story the central character is engaged in a daily struggle to elude his or her predators and find a secure place to live or hide, temporarily, at least. There are, however, few places to go, the family home being the most dangerous of all.

In the title story "Traplins" a young teen is unable to live at home on a day-to-day basis, mainly because of the frequent beatings he suffers, sometimes from his father but more often from his older brother. To escape, Will hides in the basement, stays overnight at friends' places, and seeks refuge at the home of the Smythes, a childless, professional couple who, out of genuine concern for Will's safety, urge him to live with them. Even though Will knows that he is safe with the Smythes, he feels cornered by their offer and rejects it, instinctively thinking of escape.

The 16 year-old female narrator of "Queen of the North," on the other hand, does manage to make a brief escape. But her escape to Vancouver offers only temporary respite from the trauma of her life in the North. At home Adelaine has been the victim of a sexually abusive uncle and has dealt with her pain by fighting and by using drugs and alcohol. When she learns that her Uncle Josh has likely been abused himself, she confronts him by naming the abusive priest of her uncle's boyhood:

As he [Uncle Josh] was opening my bedroom door, I said, "Father Archibald?"

He stopped...

"I've said my prayers," I said.

He backed away and closed the door.

In the kitchen the next morning he wouldn't look at me. I felt light and giddy, not believing it could end so easily.

Her elation is short-lived, however, when two days later she watches her new boyfriend leave with Uncle Josh on her uncle's fishing boat "Queen of the North." The implication is that her uncle has just found his next victim.

Redemptive moments are few in Robinson's stories. Nevertheless, her characters do survive their most recent ordeals and do not surrender, despite the weight of their broken histories. Mere survival, after all, Robinson seems to suggest, offers some measure of hope, the possibility that life can be lived differently. Robinson extends that possibility without betraying the integrity of her narrative and resolving the lives of her characters neatly.

Some readers may resist the tentative, fractured quality of Robinson's narrative form. Perhaps her stories are unfinished products, crude attempts at mirroring the lives of a cast of broken people. This charge could be made without too much argument against the weakest entry in the collection, "Contact Sports," a story of some 100 pages that features a shapeless, meandering narrative that finally peters out in exhaustion. *Traplins* ultimately reflects the work of a writer who is challenging the conventions of form and wrestling with subjects that demand an uncommon courage to address.

As a writer who is also Aboriginal, Robinson has chosen to avoid identifying her characters as being Aboriginal. Perhaps they do have Aboriginal blood, perhaps not. Perhaps Robinson is suggesting that her characters are simply people whose lives deserve to be made present.

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Ruffo, Armand Garnet: *Grey Owl: The Mystery of Archie Belaney*. Regina: Coteau Books, 1996, ISBN 1-55050-109-7 Paper CDN \$ 14.95.

On 18 September, 1888 at Hastings, England Archibald Stansfeld Belaney was born to a teenaged Katherine Belaney (nee Cox) and a thirty-one year old remittance man, George Belaney. Five decades later, a continent and a lifetime away, a man known as Grey Owl died on 13 April, 1938 at Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. The incredible life lived in the intervening years by a man who assumed a different identity is captured imaginatively by Armand Garnet Ruffo through the poetry, prose, and photographs in this collection.

More than a biographer of physical events, Ruffo examines the evolving personality of a British boy who liked animals and "playing Indian" and who, when he moved to Canada, deconstructed his own past to create an entirely new persona. Multiple voices explore the psychological processes which transformed Archie Belaney into Grey Owl, and mark as well the response of others to this change.

Like his father, Archie Belaney had several spouses. Like his father, Archie also showed little responsibility for his many relationships and the children he fathered. Unlike his father, however, Archie came to believe that he had a contribution to make to society. His perceived contribution was to show respect for the natural environment. As he took on the persona of an Aboriginal, Grey Owl, he found that people listened when he spoke of environmental concerns. For several years he travelled across North America and Britain giving presentations on animal and forest conservation. In this way it appears that he rationalized his appropriation of an Aboriginal voice. Yet Ruffo posits that because his life as Grey Owl was a lie, Belaney sought in vain for a self concept with which he could be secure. Ruffo's poetry under the persona of Belaney illustrates well how despite fame and success, the man who becomes Grey Owl never finds fulfilment: