

## THE GIRL WHO WAS BORN THAT WAY

Gail Benick

Toronto: Inanna Publications and Education Inc., 2015

REVIEWED BY CAROL LIPSZYC

At the heart of Gail Benick's *The Girl Who was Born that Way* is a double ring of four sisters. On the outer rim move the eldest two, Hetty and Tilya, child survivors of the Lodz Ghetto eager to reinvent themselves in their adopted country; in the inner circle, we greet the younger American-born sisters, the novella's narrator, Linda Sue, and her older sibling, Terry Sue, who was born with Turner's Syndrome. I looked forward to the spirited letters Terry Sue writes at the end of each chapter, letters which lend an epistolary mode to the novella. In spite of her genetic mutation and the physical and mental afflictions she suffers (she becomes anorexic and is hospitalized) Terry Sue's voice remains inquisitive, youthful, and loving.

In turn, Linda is protective and considerate of her sister, at one point buying foam rubber to make falsies for Terry Sue, who does not develop normally. Highly attuned, Linda decodes her child and adolescent world, making sense of her family and of a broken past that imposes without warning like a sinister wind funneling its way into the home. Often that wind is chased away by her father's sense of adventure and her older sisters' desire to regain normalcy, to keep their Jewish identity under the radar, and to integrate with dignity into St. Louis society circa the 1950s-60s. Danger lurks, though, real or otherwise. Linda Sue has internalized some of her mother's palpable fear. At one point, Linda

Sue watches an antique fan turning overhead and conjures up decapitation, imagining her mother's suicide should such a catastrophe befall her. Of course, her family did survive a cataclysm before she was born. In a segment that reminded me of Anne Frank's rules for the Annex, Hetty relays to her younger sisters the Berkowitz Guide to Surviving in the Lodz Ghetto. Her memories here, with credit to Benick, are transplanted onto the page authentically, sparsely, through the eyes of a child. (How the family survived the liquidation of the Lodz Ghetto and deportation to Auschwitz in the summer of 1944 is not dealt with in the back story.)

Along with the sadness, the "shadow of grief" her mother conveys, the narrative moves at a buoyant pace as navigated by Linda Sue, highlighted by flashes of family outings, pubescent dances with boys, and by her interaction with colourful neighbourhood characters whose voices add texture to the novella and perspective to Linda Sue's world view. All this before the novella takes its tragic turn in the untimely death of Terry Sue. At the end of the novella, it is Tilya, renamed Toni, who writes a dissertation in honor of her sister's misunderstood disease and death. In this instance, unlike so many of Linda Sue's questions left unanswered in the novella, Toni's inquiry is a gift of scholarship and commemoration, one that is both fruitful and life-affirming.

*Carol Lipszyc's book of short stories, The Saviour Shoes and Other Stories, was published in October 2014 by Inanna Publications, which also released her collection of lyrical poetry, Singing Me Home. Carol has also published on arts-based education in international journals. Earning her doctorate in*

*education at OISE/UT, Carol is currently an Associate Professor at State University of New York, Plattsburgh teaching English teacher education and writing arts.*

## THE RIVER

Helen Humphreys

Toronto: ecw Press, 2015

REVIEWED BY RYAN KOELWYN

Helen Humphreys' latest literary achievement, *The River* is a thoughtful rumination on connectivity, people, and place. The inspiration undoubtedly: a section of the Napanee River in Ontario that runs along Humphreys' property. In this triumphantly pensive book, Humphreys explores the ways that the river communicates with us through various accounts of fiction, historical fact, natural history, and visual documentation. In search of a genuine analysis, *The River* is a collection of dichotomous observations. These oppositions—movement and stillness, attract and repel, friend and foe, remembering and forgetting—are reoccurring themes in *The River*.

It is difficult to decipher where a river begins or ends. The river exists in relation to other people, places, and things. Humphreys' acknowledgment of this relation is what makes *The River* an unparalleled object analysis. Humphreys abandons her first attempts to define the river as the beginning of the book, but includes them in the introduction to state a case for the objective of the book: to examine a place without an agenda. Aptly titled, "Anthropocene," the third section refers to the current geological period beginning when human activity significantly altered environmental conditions. The relationship between human beings, and living