

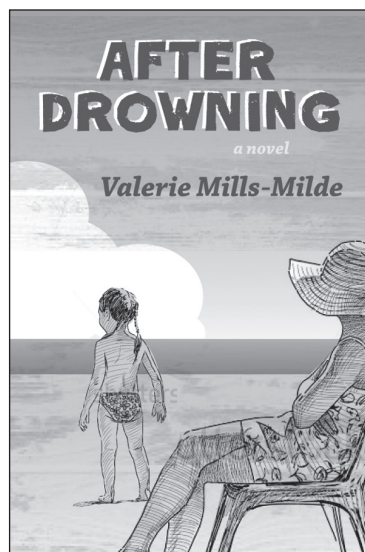
“mark on all of them” but after her brother, Keaton’s, disappearance, it has made her distrust men, including Jeff. She tells Jeff that she doesn’t know “how to be together.” Reuniting with her mother, who is now sober and in a loving relationship with Ed, she can’t let go of her resentment and suspicion that her mother’s changed life is authentic.

Pen begins to change when she sees a local biker detach himself from his gang and dive into the sea, organizing a chain of people to try to rescue the drowning boy. As the character, Tom Valentine, a member of the Bandidos, unfolds through the novel, the reader shares with Pen the realization that even someone who is capable of cold-blooded murder may experience a moment of compassion.

This is one of the novel’s strengths: the sensitive and subtle recognition that people have many sides to them and that sometimes they can change; that they need support to change; and that they have to suffer the consequences of actions and decisions, sometimes not of their own making.

The author depicts with sensitivity the relationship of mothers and children. Pen lacks confidence in her parenting skills because she didn’t get from her mother, Irene, what she needed growing up. Irene, married too young and burdened with children, drowned her misery in alcohol. But Pen’s instincts are good and she is a nurturing mother, recognizing also the bond between Maddie and her father, Jeff, who loves both of them unreservedly. Irene admits that she failed her daughter but years of neglect cannot be forgotten even if the relationship can be mended.

Mills-Milde handles character development with sensitivity and skill. The novel is peopled with unique individuals with inner conflicts, sometimes more inclined to behave well and sometimes not, just as in real life. Her characterization of the



child, Maddie, is delightful, with all the behaviours and language that one would expect from a sensitive four-year-old. Her description of Jeff, Maddie’s father, wiping off the little girl’s face, “with so much delicacy and care, as if he might have been taking dust from a butterfly wing” is very moving. This nuanced development of character is reflected in the description of the setting of a depressed, rundown town on a beautiful lake which used to provide bounty in the form of fish but can turn on a dime into a menacing adversary with a capacity to kill.

Finally, the author has an excellent sense of pacing. What we learn about the past from Pen’s memories and her internal life is inexorably linked with events that roll out to a surprising and satisfying climax. Love and relationships may fail us in life but without them we are set adrift as this author so beautifully demonstrates.

Renate Krakauer began writing fiction after retirement, and she had short stories and essays published in literary magazines, the Globe and Mail, and two anthologies. Her memoir, But I Had a Happy Childhood, was published by the Azrieli Foundation in 2009 and her novel, Only by Blood, was published by Inanna in 2015.

THE DEAD MAN

Nora Gold

Toronto: Inanna Publications, 2016

REVIEWED BY CAROL
RICKER-WILSON

Nora Gold’s *The Dead Man* is as impressive, as was her first novel, *Fields of Exile*, in its thought-provoking subject matter. In *Fields*, Gold focused on antisemitism in the academy. In *The Dead Man*, she ventures into the literary terrain of women and madness.

Gold exploits the tropes of that most gendered genre, romance (in which the emotional angst of a female protagonist is given primacy, the socio-political world figures largely as the backdrop to an intense and ever-anxious love affair, and a seemingly troubled but fascinating man—somewhat above her in station—is ultimately understood), to write a “horror” story of an inability—or refusal—to overcome an obsession.

Widowed, fiftyish Eve, a music therapist and composer, is the fraught protagonist, who, five years after being unceremoniously dumped by email, perpetually fluctuates between recognizing the gross flaws of her former lover, Jake, and denying their depth and magnitude, as she parses every moment of their past relationship in order to determine if he ever really loved her. The tale presents a litany of her emotional excesses. In the first paragraph she’s contemplating whether to subject Jake to her fortieth or so act of phone harassment. She subsequently recalls her distress, during the relationship, when his attention was temporarily focused on driving or chopping vegetables, rather than on her. She wanted “to lose herself in him, like an infant with a parent” (219). He