

in history, and provide the reader's imagination with the chronology the title so wittily denies.

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## **OUTSIDE IN: A POLITICAL MEMOIR**

Libby Davies  
Toronto: Between the Lines, 2018

### **REVIEWED BY AALYA AHMAD**

In *Outside In: A Political Memoir*, long-time NDP Member of Parliament Libby Davies describes her early days of community organizing, Saul Alinsky-style, in the 1970s, helping to build the Downtown Eastside Residents Association (DERA) at a time when she was bursting with energy and fight and DERA resembled an (idealized) union, “militant and raw with an attentive and active membership.” Alas, few unions in Canada nowadays could be described thus. Indeed, one often hears talk nowadays of a crisis in both the labour movement and its erstwhile political arm, the NDP, a sense of ineffectiveness, stagnation, and the stifling grip of an “old boys’ network.” Indeed, Davies’ memoir is tinged with nostalgia for an NDP where “party and caucus lines” were not as rigidly enforced and MPs actively participated in occupations,

demonstrations, and sit-ins.

*Outside In*, arriving in a federal election year like a doorstep canvasser, is a particularly relevant book for this jaded epoch, containing valuable lessons for those on all points of the political spectrum and primarily for women considering a run for political positions. Many passages are marked with the heartbreakingly familiar sense of a woman forced to navigate impossibly patriarchal institutions, facing sexism at times subtle and elsewhere unmistakably overt. Davies frequently describes a sense of imposter syndrome underlying her commitment to bringing transformative change on behalf of her constituents of the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, in which a burgeoning health crisis for drug users was blowing up at the time that Davies first went to Parliament. Her campaigns of support for addicts, sex workers, affordable housing, and harm reduction measures such as safe injection sites are arguably what Davies is best known for; her memoir reminds us of how difficult it was for her to hold onto her convictions at a time when these issues had little to no support, even among other New Democrats.

The fierce determination with which Davies advocates for her marginalized constituents is juxtaposed with these moments of uncertainty. For example, arriving frazzled for a media interview with a Conservative opponent, a younger, well-groomed Peter MacKay, for example, Davies recalls him looking her up and down—“I didn’t really look like MP material...” However, her years of “scrapping with political opponents” disprove the “silent judgement” of the Ottawa elite. The book offers its readers many such moments of Davies’ passion overcoming her vulnerability and sense of exclusion. We follow her as a rookie municipal politician and then as a rookie MP,

steadily gaining confidence as she learns how to navigate patriarchal political scenes. Similarly, she shows her readers the complications of the personal intersecting with the political—Davies broke ground both as a young municipal councillor defending her relationship with her partner and fellow politician Bruce Eriksen against scandal-mongers, and then as the first female Member of Parliament to reveal her later same-sex relationship. The memoir shows us the vulnerability underlying these personal stories, somewhat to Davies’ discomfort after a lifetime of public battle.

Davies identifies as essentially a community organizer, distancing herself from the “Ottawa vortex” and in passages like this: “My politics grew like a wild tree from the experience of organizing, not from the party” and “my political instincts came from the street, not from inside a political party.” Elsewhere, however, this conviction seems to falter as Davies becomes more comfortable working within the system. Early in the book, Davies speculates that DERA, as a scrappy young grassroots organization, might have achieved more if it could have been less “impatient and intolerant” in its power struggles with liberals and social service agencies. Her recollections are shot through with this duality, which is clearly articulated: Davies is nothing if not self-reflective.

Early on, Davies tells us, she learned “a basic political lesson: Don’t shy away from the institutions of power even if they oppress you; rather, learn how to use them for what you need to do.” Radical readers may ask how that squares with one of the core teachings of feminism, Audre Lorde’s reminder that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” In *Outside In*, the question becomes can we forge different tools? Is it useful or futile to keep chipping away

with the same blunted objects? These difficult questions—arguably central to the NDP’s history—repeatedly surface in Davies’ story of attempting to transform the master’s house. Regardless of how one might judge her success, this memoir compels us to applaud her efforts.

*Aalya Ahmad obtained her Ph.D. in Comparative Literary Studies at Carleton University (in the same program as Kim Elliott, Libby Davies’ partner). She is a nationally known feminist and social justice activist and writer, and the former National Coordinator of the Ad Hoc Coalition for Women’s and Human Rights, as well as a founding member of the grassroots group The Radical Handmaids. Her work on feminist and social justice issues has been published in Our Times, Briarpatch, Atlantis, and Canadian Woman Studies. She lives in Gatineau, Quebec and is presently taking on bullying in the labour movement in her next book.*

## **WATER MY SOUL: 90 MEDITATIONS FROM AN OLD ORDER MENNONITE**

Darla Weaver  
Harrisonburg, VA: Harold Press, 2017

**REVIEWED BY CAROLYNE VAN  
DER MEER**

When I selected this book from the list of volumes to be reviewed, I had no idea that it was a religious book—not that that would have stopped me. I just didn’t expect that a reference to “old order Mennonite” meant something to do with religious practice—even though we do generally understand that Mennonites are part of certain Christian groups. I still thought this book would be more about lifestyle as opposed to

beliefs, but of course, lifestyle is often intrinsically and inextricably tied to beliefs. As it turns out, I had quite a churchy upbringing and while a religious approach to a book might be uncomfortable for some, it is not the case for me. I was fascinated to learn though, that Herald Press is “a Christian publisher known for transformative books on reconciliation, community, discipleship, mission, spirituality, and theology.” I’ve learned a lot about publishers over the years but admittedly, don’t know much about Christian publishers—and certainly did not know about this one. There is clearly much the Christian publishing world has to offer that mainstream buyers will miss.

What’s interesting about Weaver’s little volume—and I say little because even though it’s just over 200 pages, none of the entries is more than a page and a half—is that it doesn’t necessarily feel like a religious book. That’s in part because the scripture referred to in each reading is not mandatory. You don’t HAVE to read it. Of course, it’s helpful because it provides context for the stories Weaver tells in her entries. But frankly, I didn’t feel like I had to follow the scripture suggestions—and in many cases did not. I felt like Weaver gave me so much of her own experience that I “got” the lesson. She doesn’t need to hit you over the head with a frying pan for you to get it.

The book is divided into 13 weeks of “meditations”—with one meditation per day. One of the great metaphors she uses is tending garden—so themes that dominate her meditations are along the lines of preparing soil; setting down roots; reaping and sowing; flowering and bearing fruit; birth, growth, and blooming; and pruning back the forest. Weaver has three children: Cody (14), Alisha (12), Matthan (5)—and is married to Laverne, who shares a woodworking shop with his father.

All of her meditations are woven in and around her relationships with her children and husband, exploring the richness—and the pitfalls—of raising kids and navigating marriage. She also shares details of her life as an author of books (she has written three) and a writer of articles for publications serving Amish and Old Order groups.

In addition to a scripture reading, each meditation is accompanied by a prayer and a reflection. These are extremely short, found in smallish type at the bottom of the second page of each meditation. I found I grew to look forward to reading them, as somehow, they succinctly summed up the theme of each meditation and left me with food for thought. “How can I be less fearful and more trusting today?”; “What is one good thing I have learned from pain?”; and “What small beginning to some large task can I make today?” are some examples of the reflections. Some of these, however, were very God-focused, while others, like the examples I’ve cited here, were rather general—but they all succeeded as advertised: they got me to reflect, either on the content of Weaver’s meditation or on my own day.

I thoroughly enjoyed Weaver’s devotional volume and found her meditations a refreshing way to end the day. By the time I finished *Water My Soul*, I felt as though I had walked briefly alongside a fellow writer, mother, and friend. There is much we can learn from an Old Order Mennonite approach. And much that Christian publishers might have to offer the mainstream seeker of peace and relaxation.

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