

Vancouver Book Prize. She recently completed a new novel, After the Language Changed, and is at work on various other writing projects.

SHADOWS LIGHT

Ann Elizabeth Carson
Toronto: Longboat Alliance Graphics
Group Inc., 2005

REVIEWED BY RUTH GOLDSMITH

If you love poetry, add this gem to your collection. And if you always hated poetry in school, give it another try with these refreshing new poems by Ann Carson. This is your chance to revisit that unexplored area of your life; you may be pleasantly surprised at how accessible it is.

In her solitude, Ann's senses are sharpened by the sounds of everyday living: "This is a good silence, the rustle of people's living. The silence so deafening a poem has a hard time finding a way through it."

Ann has incisive comments on noise pollution. In the serenity of the country, motorboats offend her: "Please, get to the other side of the lake, that raspy noise is spoiling the early morning stillness."

Take this book with you on to a crowded subway train and allow Ann to transport you to another dimension: "I will read a book in the sun, on the subway. I will read a book to stay away from my life—it really works." Take this book with you—it really works!

Indeed, Ann is an ideal travel companion. When you read this book you will be embarking on a journey, along a road you may never have traveled before. Feel the crisp, clear morning air. Or dip into this treasure of images when you are encased in an economy class airplane seat, and read "Day slips down over the roof-tops" or "The window is open this morn-

ing upper and lower sashes, framing a perfect landscape."

From the exhilaration of early morning in the country to the utter futility of a son's tragic suicide: "That spring I was healing from a winter-long illness. My younger son is found dead in the back of his van. Only thirty-five. Shot through the head. By his own hand. There is a hurt in me so deep. blackness inks my soul. in dark bowels of pain." And in a later poem, her answer: "Felled, I sank out of sight, frozen solid in shock. All winter. I was so very still and silent. What kept me alive? Music.... The sun still touches me, sounds of rain bring some pleasure... It's hard, the way you walk beside me now."

In comparison, her daughter is "successful, easy going, comfortable in her skin kind of person who has it all, even a group of women with whom she can explore the distance."

There is feminist rage here too: "I could rage to the end of my next life. It extends through generations of women still howling 'cross the days and nights... I have howled for years. It does no good."

Ann's comments on family life will surely strike a responsive chord: "My grandfather made my grandmother cut off her long chestnut hair and throw it in the garbage. Because it was unseemly, in a married woman." Ann's reaction is: "I know the violence of not being received, or believed, of being someone who disappoints." And "Theirs is not a family drawn closer in crisis. Rather, they fragment, splitting apart. Life goes on as usual, each alone."

Ann is not only a poet, but a sculptor as well. Interspersed among her poems are photographs of her sculptures. Reading this book is like walking through an art gallery: each poem paints a landscape, an experience, an emotion. Ann recreates the key moments in her life and hands them to us in print, so that we may read and savour them to recapture and experience their sorrow, their splendour, and their joy.

Finally, Ann prepares us for our last journey. "There is no place to come home to. There is no language for the very old ... afraid, not of death but of living too long."

And "To die at once, or piece by piece. We have no choice of memories."

"How do I live a different life when I am so old?"

"I must remember not to forget to remember."

You certainly will never forget this book. It really works!

Reprinted from the Spring 2006 issue of Contact.

Ruth Goldsmith is a member of the group who write and produce, Contact, the Older Women's Network quarterly newsletter. She has worked as a book editor, in public relations and as an advertising consultant. Her passions in life are feminism, classical and baroque music, and her three grandchildren. She lives happily in Toronto: alone.

PERFORMING FEMININITY: REWRITING GENDER IDENTITY

Lesla Lockford
Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press,
2004.

REVIEWED BY SALINA ABJI

Most feminists would agree that women still face significant ideological pressures to conform to traditional, patriarchal notions of femininity. Do women feel similarly pressured, however, to perform in prescribed ways in order to be taken seriously as feminists? *Performing Femininity* challenges feminist readers to question the complex web of ideological constructs through which subjectivity is negotiated. For

Lockford, this involves a critique of both the socially dominant norms of prescribed femininity, as well as feminist disavowals of these acts, which “likewise function ideologically by pressing women toward conformity in order to be taken seriously as feminists and as women.”

In developing her analysis, Lockford draws largely from contemporary feminist cultural criticism, including Judith Butler’s ground-breaking work on performativity and Julia Kristeva’s theoretical explorations of the abject body. Lockford deliberately chooses autoethnography as her methodological approach, which involves “the use of narratives shaped out of a writer’s personal experiences within a culture.” Hence, the text is composed of three narrative performances or autoethnographic reflections of Lockford’s experience as an image-obsessed weight watcher, an exotic dancer, and a theatrical performer. Autoethnography allows Lockford to engage readers somatically, challenging them to question their intellectual and emotional responses to the narrative text as a way of illuminating underlying ideological assumptions. Her intention is both to attract and repel the reader; to position herself as “abject” by transgressing the boundaries of the reader’s tacit conceptions of gender norms.

Lockford’s approach results in a critical work that is both demanding and enlightening in its direct challenge to the reader to test her own assumptions. Perhaps the best example of this involves Lockford’s performance of what she terms a “scholarly striptease for academic gain”. She recounts how, while conducting academic research on the lived experiences of women in the sex trade, she is challenged by one of her research subjects to perform as an exotic dancer, and through that performance, to transgress the boundaries between ‘researcher’ and ‘researched’ subject. Utilizing a narrative style that foregrounds personal voice, Lockford leads the reader through a sophisticated and

insightful recounting of her conflicted experience—to strip or not to strip?—and the implications of her choice in terms of her identities as a feminist, as an academic, and as a woman.

For Lockford, the experience of stripping illuminates the problematic “abjection” of sex-work within mainstream feminism as a necessarily oppressive act; one in which the female sex-worker is assumed to have internalized her oppression. In positioning herself as both ‘researcher’ and ‘researched’ subject, and by adopting an ‘abject’ performative stance, she challenges the reader to consider both the limits and the possibilities of a sex-trade worker’s performative choices within a patriarchal system; to reconsider complex notions of agency, pleasure and desire, as articulated by sex-positive feminism, in the struggle to understand the multiplicity of women’s lived experiences.

The implications of *Performing Femininity* for the feminist movement are significant. Lockford’s analysis raises important questions regarding how one performs “feminism” as an act of resistance, while cautioning against the development of equally problematic norms within the movement itself. *Performing Femininity* also highlights the important role of feminist cultural critics in exploring, and in some cases transgressing, the complex ideological constructions of identity through which subjectivity is negotiated. These are the boundaries that, if left unchallenged, threaten to undermine the continued relevance of feminism as a vital socio-political movement.

Salina Abji holds a Master’s degree in Women’s Studies from Oxford University, with a specialization in feminist postcolonial literary criticism. She is currently based at York University in Toronto, where she manages the career development programs and services for students.

ALICE MUNRO: WRITING HER LIVES

Robert Thacker
Toronto: McClelland & Stewart
Ltd., 2005

REVIEWED BY DEBORAH HELLER

Robert Thacker’s *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives*, the first full-length biography of its subject, will be welcomed by Munro’s expanding and admiring readership. The author’s engagement with Munro’s work is long-standing, dating from his graduate student years, when Munro had published just three books, and continuing into the present. Today Thacker, an American, is Professor of Canadian Studies and English at St. Lawrence University (New York) and a leading authority on Alice Munro.

Thacker’s current book fleshes out and updates material already contained in Catherine Sheldrick Ross’s elegantly concise *Alice Munro: A Double Life* (1992) and the recent memoir by Munro’s daughter, Sheila Munro, *Lives of Mothers and Daughters: Growing Up with Alice Munro* (2001). Munro is a writer who has drawn heavily on her own experience in creating her fictional universe. The earlier books on Munro and numerous interviews with her over the years have clarified many details of her life, enabling readers to recognize autobiographical elements in their subsequent fictional (re)incarnations. The subtitle of Thacker’s biography highlights his interest in the interplay between life and fiction that marks Munro’s writing. Explicitly, he proposes to follow “Munro’s own pattern,” tracing “her life and career going from the fact to the fiction and back again,” confident that “autobiography is embedded in [her] work . . . and she can be seen as always ‘writing her lives,’ the lives she has both lived and imagined.”

The contours of Munro’s life are by