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The Bull Calf

Reviews of Fiction, Poetry, and Literary Criticism

Current Issue

Standing at an Angle to My Age by P.W. Bridgman

Archived Issues

Reviewed by Kaarina Mikalson

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P.W. Bridgman

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Standing at an Angle to My Age. Libros Libertad, 2013.

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166 pp.

Guestbook

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In "The Long Outing," one of the stories in P.W. Bridgman's *Standing at an Angle to My Age*, an introverted young man recalls his childhood rejection of language and family: "I opened my mouth and let her perplexity extinguish the flickering candle of my speech. A tiny wisp of smoke curled up from the tip of my tongue and was gone" (74). This brief passage brings together the major themes of Bridgman's collection: family, expression, and the decisive moments in life when love is offered or denied.

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This collection of stories takes the reader from Canada's west coast to the British Isles. Bridgman does not rest too comfortably in any one form or style; he pushes himself to experiment with perspective, chronology and length. One piece frames itself as an obituary, written with no small amount of sarcasm by an unlikeable lawyer's family and colleagues. Another story reverses slowly through a man's life, beginning with his death, moving through his second-rate marriage, back to the moment his first love is killed in the Blitz.

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Bridgman situates the Second World War as a central climactic event, taking lives and reshaping families. In "Our Secret" and "De Mortuis Nil Nisi," the war frames traumatic incidents that must be confronted by the next generation.

Both of the young protagonists stumble across dangerous family secrets rooted in the war. In "Our Secret," Astrid learns the truth of her paternity when she finds her mother collapsed on the floor and near death. Bridgman lingers on this moment of dual discovery:

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she searched for words – words that hadn't been used by Father in his overwrought graces or his thundering, extemporaneous, Johnny Walker sermons. She probed her memory for delicate words that she might carefully weave into a prayer of entreaty, of contrition and of humble submission to a God whose intervention was needed but who, deep down, even now, she did not believe existed. (23)

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This is a graceful representation of a shaken young woman struggling to distinguish herself from her overbearing father and care for her mother in a

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new way. Her ultimate response to this great reveal is to reweave her familial love away from her father's oppressive control.

Bridgman is at his best with the subject of family, when he strives to render the resounding moments when love is spoken and broken. The book's opening story, "Ceann Dubh Dilis," is a brief, beautiful story of love between an elderly man and the family that takes him in. The story's narrator, a young boy, speaks back to the isolation of aging: "I could see that there was magic and mystery locked up inside Mr Pound" (2). The unnamed mother cares for Mr Pound in intimate, sometimes humiliating ways, and he is finally able to reciprocate that love through music. This is just one of many instances when Bridgman captures love expressed in gesture. Though he clearly takes great pleasure in language, he allows love to play itself out wordlessly: in snow, in song, and in the sharing of books, music, and flowers.

But there are darker forms of expression, and some of the shorter pieces explore the uneasy relationship between desire, violence and power. "Young Love in the Brayburn Road" features a boy who declares himself the protector of a pretty – and mostly indifferent – girl, but his possessive violence is more frightening than impressive. On the surface, "Sir" is a story of a bullying teacher, but it ultimately gestures to the systematic abuse and racism of the education system. Both stories address violence in early adolescence; this is an intriguing theme, and I would love to see Bridgman explore it in a longer narrative.

It is clear from the multiple epigraphs, quotations and allusions that Bridgman is a disciple of modernist literature. Many of his male, academically minded characters pay homage to Eliot, Joyce and Beckett, as if to wish themselves (and Bridgman) into their illustrious canon. Taking his cue from Eliot, Bridgman weaves multiple languages through his text. The Gaelic is the best fit, as it shores up the walls of Bridgman's Irish settings. Alongside the citation and multilingualism, Bridgman demonstrates an affinity for alliteration. Phrases like "spiralling dizzily downward into danger" bring some momentum to his prose, which sometimes stumbles over wordy detail.

Some readers will relate to Bridgman as a fellow fan of modernism, and so will embrace a text peppered with modernist allusions. Others will be drawn in by his carefully crafted relationships. Any reader will savour the occasions when Bridgman pushes aside heavy detail and lingers in moments of pain, love, and resolve.



Kaarina Mikalson is a Master's student in the department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta. Her thesis examines constructions of gender in Canadian fiction from the Great Depression. She is Project Manager for Canada and the Spanish Civil War and a research assistant for the Canadian Writing Research Collaboratory.

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