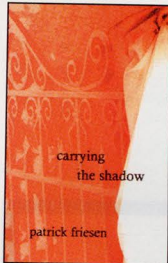


BOOKS

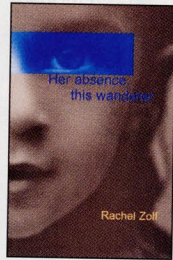
Something wonderful is happening in poetry. Poets are back. For the last 10 years, poetry in Canada was bedazzled by the whorish charms of its evil fraternal twin, Spoken Word. But the thrall is gone—and writers who choose their words carefully, not commercially, are returning to reclaim their rightful place, books in hand.

If anyone could weather the cheap bump and grind of vaudeville poetry, it's Patrick Friesen. A patient mason of words, Friesen writes poetry the way farmers used to make rock walls—by slowly weighing each word against its neighbours until balance (and permanence) is achieved. Friesen's latest collection, **CARRYING THE SHADOW** (Beach Holme), is a slow, sad waltz of a book,

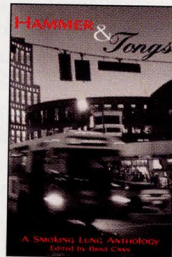


layered with shuffling music and smoky regret. Friesen is a writer of "a certain age," by which I mean he's now at a point in his poet's life when he is quite certain that he knows what matters. Subsequently, the poems in this volume speak beautifully, and with conviction, about coming to terms with adult choices, mortality and the small indecencies of aging. Not that Friesen is ready for codgerdom just yet, but I doubt the pale darlings practicing hand-jive poetics will have much use for Friesen's gravitas. And that's my idea of progress.

Rachel Zolf is not of "a certain age," but her first book, **HER ABSENCE, THIS WANDERER** (BuschekBooks), is my favourite debut book of the season. Why? Because the poetry is all about identity, personal history and self-actualization, and yet it never, never reads like one of those ponderous, self-aggrandizing memoir essays from the back page of *The Globe and Mail*. By all accounts, Zolf—a Jewish, lesbian descendant of Holocaust survivors—should have enough issues to clog a freeway. But her poetry is far from maudlin. Brightly written in a pointilist style, it sings where you'd expect it to wail, and turns playful just when you anticipate pathos. The stunning centre-piece of the book, where Zolf recounts her trip to central Europe and the gravesites of her relatives, is a blunt, direct elegy as fine as hand-stitched lace. Zolf writes about the impossible, about events that defy poetry, in the only way possible—by making the unspeakable the silent, omitted under-grammar of her poems. Understated and sharp, *Her Absence, This Wanderer* shows how sometimes less is more than we can bear.



For a more light-hearted read, but one no less accomplished, flip through **HAMMER & TONGS**, an anthology of poetry (and some fiction) culled from B.C.'s legendary Smoking Lung micropress. Like Zolf, most of the writers in *Hammer & Tongs* are youngish, even coltish, and many seem more determined to make a point than a poem. But out from under the usual assortment of I-hate-my-roommate-where's-my-bus-token undergrad meanderings, some lasting poetry emerges. Billeh Nickerson's entry, "Sometimes Gay Means Happy," is a bright, deliciously nasty series of barbed observations about contemporary gay life and its increasingly mainstreamed mediocrity. Nickerson looks up at his community from the gutter, not down from the condo loft—and therefore, as Wilde taught us, he can also see the stars.



Conversely, Karen Solie's "Eating Dirt" is the most pensive selection in the book; a solid, well-crafted series of poems about the frightening instability of romance and the shady power games that construct intimacy. Reading Solie is like reading Anne Michaels without having to unswaddle all Michaels's Laura Ashley trimmings. In between Nickerson's bite and Solie's blush, *Hammer & Tongs* offers an enormous variety of new work—some lovely, some merely lovable, but all of it important if Canadian poetry is to recover from the brash Americanisms of its yodelling caucus. —R.M. Vaughan



ART

With the political power of graphic design currently trapped somewhere between semiotic theory and activist posters stapled to a creosoted telephone pole, it's time for a rescue mission. **ANTAGONIST**, a new Toronto zine spearheaded by designer Patricio Davila, dares ask if design is a medium that can and should be used to sell ideas instead of sugar water. (Davila himself splits his time between corporate and charity work.) Subtitled "The poetry and politics of graphic design," *Antagonist* is textually sparse, depending mainly on imagery to convey subtle jabs at "McDomination" (situating the golden arches in heavenly clouds) or sledgehammer attacks on the phallogocentric nature of the industrial war machine. While *Antagonist's* promise to utilize "graphic violence" is still evolving, it succeeds admirably in pushing graphic design to the forefront of our concern, instead of letting it languish invisibly. For those tired of the intellectual teflon of glossy magazines, *Antagonist* inverts Swiss-school modernism—which preached orderly and linear graphic design to solve communication problems—and spotlights sociopolitical issues many would prefer to ignore. For e-mail information and free digital files, visit www.interlog.com/~reddsgn/antagonist —Ryan Bigge

MUSIC

When I first stumbled on Ottawa's Wooden Stars at a live show some six years ago, I thought I'd gone to indie-music heaven. Their complex, polyphonic melodies and ricocheting, arithmetic rhythms finally gave me refuge from Southern Ontario pop's three-chord antics. Now, Mike Feuerstack and company have lent their moody poetics to ex-Eric's Tripper Julie Doiron's latest project. **JULIE DOIRON AND THE WOODEN STARS** is the simply titled record released by Sappy Records, Doiron's own, Fredericton-based label. A quiet, melancholic ramble through a world of wispy intimacies and off-kilter relationships, the album reflects an unusual but effective pairing of Doiron's sparse style with the Stars' elaborate arrangements. True, you won't find the whimsy of earlier Eric's Trip offerings here; and while the classic criss-crossing guitars and start-and-stop rhythms of the Wooden Stars are present, they are much subdued in their new, more minimalist pop frame. But *Julie Doiron* points to the beginnings of a promising collaboration. And Doiron's understated vocals still have that way of sneaking up on you with their intensity—a welcome salve from the jagged little Alanis knock-offs and breathy, crescendo-drenched divas who flog their wares on womyn's compilations these days. —Sarmishta Subramanian



CULTURAL WORKER