

# The blessing of dull literature

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What's the worst thing that ever happens in Canadian fiction?

Barbara Kay - Columnist

Somebody falls through the ice and almost drowns (or occasionally does), causing embedded family woes to proliferate. A woman wrestles over whether or not to have an abortion. A couple is unhappy; one of them makes the wrenching decision to move from Vancouver to Toronto. Rural protagonists stare out over fields of grain or out to sea, conjuring the tragic or arduous lives of their ancestors. Plot and action, when they occur, happen in flashbacks, or in other lands and eras. *Autres pays, autres moeurs*. England's outstanding quarterly *Granta* magazine publishes emergent writers and photojournalists of exceptional talent from everywhere in the anglosphere. Occasionally it's all new fiction. But usually it's an eclectic mix of short and long essays, memoirs, fiction, poetry - all focused on a single theme.

Issue #112 was devoted to Pakistan. Most of the authors were born in Pakistan and grew up in England or America. The issue included: a long essay on Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's founding father, who "would be shocked by Pakistan today"; a history of Kashmir's place between warring Pakistani and Indian troops; a meditation on Western-influenced Pakistani artists' agonizing obsession with their identity; and a disquisition on Pashtun culture. All very informative, objective and interesting, all dealing more or less with Pakistan's troubled history, but speaking more to the intellect than the gut.

Then there were the more disturbing pieces that evoked Pakistani culture as it affects individuals' lives, and here, because the reader identifies with the protagonist, the going gets rougher.

In one piece, "White Girls," a Pakistani journalist in London describes the difficulties in negotiating a path to sexual intimacy between the narrow strictures of his old-country parents and his Western-influenced preference for a female peer. He falls in love with a white girl. He knows his parents won't accept her and the relationship is "doomed." She asks him: "Why do you preclude the possibility that I could make you happy?" He answers, "We don't really do happy in my culture. We try to find reasons to be miserable."

In another short story, the lovesick suitor of a hospital nurse "brought a Mauser [rifle] to his declaration of love." Love and the threat of violence are inextricably conjoined. Rejected, the suitor fires his Mauser in the air, which sets off a chain reaction of spontaneous spiralling mayhem. The city is shut down for three days during which "a bank teller is shot dead for smiling," five children's coffins are left unattended as ambulance drivers are shot at and "three-billion rupees worth of Suzukis, Toyotas and Hinopaks are burned down."

In a brief, riveting first-person narrative, "A Beheading," a young husband and father traces the steps from his window shattering to the "sound of men running up the wooden stairs" to his brutal death. He knows what is going to happen to him. At first it isn't made clear why. He is bound and gagged and beaten, dumped in a car trunk. Every bump in the road "slams through the car." He feels malarial. His thoughts: "I hope they didn't kill my son and my wife and my parents. I hope they didn't rape my wife. I hope whatever they do they don't use acid on me."

Then he's in a house. He is not a religious Muslim: "I wish I could remember how to say my prayers.. But I can't risk it. I'll make a mistake and if they see that, things will be even worse for me." His killers set up the tripod and camera. They ignore his pleas for mercy. He pleads in English, and now we understand his "crime": "I've always censored myself. I've never written about religion. I've always tried to be respectful. If I made a mistake just tell me. Tell me what to write.. " It's no use. They tape his mouth shut and pull his head up by the hair. "It feels sexual the way he does it." The man speaks to the camera. "Then I hear it. The sound of my blood rushing out ... and I watch as I end before I am empty."

Believe it or not, this is not the most distressing of the texts in *Granta*