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## Recollecting Heritage

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## Recollecting Heritage

Annette Lapointe

*You Are Not Needed Now*. Anvil \$20

Phyllis Rudin

*My True and Complete Adventures as a Wannabe Voyageur*. NeWest \$19.95

Reviewed by Claire Omhovère, Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, EMMA

*My True and Complete Adventures as a Wannabe Voyageur* is told in the feisty voice of a young Montreal Jew, Benjamin Gabai, who wishes he had been born as a French Canadian voyageur in the heydays of the fur trade three centuries earlier. He gets a chance to entertain audiences with tales of paddling and portages after his mother's influence lands him a job in the fur trade museum opened by the Bay in the basement of their downtown Montreal department store, in commemoration of the heroic past of the Hudson's Bay Company. Benjie's adventures end abruptly when the store's new American owners decide to shut down the museum and sell its priceless collection to private collectors. The title of the novel illustrates the humorous blend Phyllis Rudin strives to achieve between a jocular eighteenth-century diction and a form of *skaz* peppered with teenage catchphrases and Yiddish idioms. The challenge is considerable. And, unfortunately, the novel does not quite measure up to it. The narrator's voice struggles to maintain a unity of tone as the plot ramifies to include flashbacks on the death of Benjie's father and the young man's subsequent friendship with a fur-trade collector who loses his own wife to a degenerative disease. His mother's voice intrudes so often into Benjie's thoughts that her own story of emotional recovery tends to divert the attention from her son's attempts to connect with an imaginary line of ancestors. As the plot inches towards the end – an outing in an “authentic” canoe stolen from the HBC collection – the main story regains centre stage and culminates in a scene reminiscent of Douglas LePan's 1948 poem “Coureurs de bois.” When the ghosts of voyageurs step out from the past and beckon to Benjie to come and join them, the novel's light tone yields to a rather ponderous defence of the integrity of Canada's cultural memory in an age when it is feared that many of its emblems, and the Bay is definitely one of them, will not endure in the face of neo-liberal greed.

Annette Lapointe's collection *You Are Not Needed Now* is her third book to date. Like Rowan Friesen, from her début novel *Stolen*, who filled Saskatchewan granaries with stuff

stolen from small, run-down Prairie towns, the narrators of these eleven short stories are obsessed with storage – finding appropriate containers for keeping the remains of their lives, but also people to entrust with what has been preserved. Storing and storying, retention and transmission are the contrary impulses Lapointe’s narrators strive to reconcile in startlingly unusual ways. There is Nicole who, while cleaning Mrs Gamble’s place, chances upon the metal box in which the elderly lady has been keeping the desiccated heart of her long dead daughter. “You found my heart,” blurts out Mrs Gamble in an assertion that sounds like a plea for acquiescence. And indeed Nicole will surprise herself (and the reader too) with the use she will have for the remnants of Mrs Gamble’s dear ones when the time comes to give birth to her own child. In another story, the mother collects teeth from her days as a dentist’s assistant in Cache Creek, BC. The place name harks back to the fur trade era and the past custom of hiding supplies from potential predators so the trappers would be able to collect them later. Hoarding is a precaution Lapointe’s characters simply cannot avoid, especially the most vulnerable among them who keep moving across the western provinces in search of employment and shelter, while others survive on “shop-slave wages” and wrestle with more insidious, emotional forms of destitution. Lapointe’s handling of sparseness and compression, the two cardinal rules of the short story, makes for a subtle compassion that renders admonishment superfluous, but calls for full attention on the part of her reader, as with this first sentence, “Erin knows about serenity because she had a boyfriend for a while who was in AA” and the abundance of revelations it suggests.

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