

## *Better With Age*

*Simon Says*, David Helwig. Oberon Press, 2012.

*Constance, Across*, Richard Cumyn. Quattro Books, 2011.

*Earthbound*, Kenneth Radu. DC Books, 2012.

Three new volumes by seasoned practitioners of the art of fiction offer abundant pleasures. Books by first-time authors have their own allure of course, not the least of which is the thrill of discovering a new voice. But there are times when first books — especially those that arrive accompanied by the shrill siren wail of publisher hype — fail to live up to expectations. When this happens the letdown can be severe. It is comforting therefore to place oneself in the hands of a writer whose command of the craft is beyond question, whose themes and techniques are familiar but who also doesn't mind challenging his readers from time to time, and to know from the outset that the book you are opening will not disappoint.

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David Helwig, an award-winning author whose output includes fiction, poetry, essays and autobiography, is still stretching the envelope forty-five years after his first books hit the market. In *Simon Says* he has brought together a sequence of seven linked stories that amount to an intimate portrait of one man: Simon McAlmond, son, lover, husband, father and academic. The stories are set at widely disparate points in Simon's life (the earliest takes place in 1949, when he is a teen, and the last in 2010, a month after his death), and enlist a range of characters and voices to complete a portrait of a man of great talent and great (perhaps greater) failings.

What is most intriguing about these stories is that they are written entirely in dialogue. It is a bold move that in lesser hands could have fallen flat. How, we might ask, can the author provide us with sufficient cues to situate the action in time and space, to distinguish among speakers, without the writing becoming awkward, contrived, or hopelessly jumbled? Writing a play requires formidable technical skill, but at least you have stage directions to provide context. Here, Helwig eschews description altogether and relies on the ebb and flow of conversation to guide the reader through the action.

And, for the most part, he succeeds. The portrait of Simon that emerges is of an ambitious young scholar who later becomes a distracted parent, an unfaithful husband, a brilliant and inspiring teacher, and a promiscuous narcissist who is not above using his personal charms and intellectual magnetism to seduce his female students.

In "Paradise" we see Simon circa 1971 surprise a young couple who have invaded his cottage. The girl is a former conquest who knows where Simon keeps the key, and as revenge for being dumped has brought a young man with

her to the remote seaside location, to have sex and then burn the place down. However, a neighbour, spotting intruders, has notified Simon.

Well, good morning.  
What?  
I said Good morning.  
Simon? What in hell are you doing here?  
Watching you two pretty young people sleep side by side.  
How did you get here?  
By car.  
But how?  
I think the question your sleepy brain is trying to articulate is what led me to rise untimely from my bed and drive up here at first light on this particular morning?  
All right, what did?  
Hey, what is this?  
It's Simon.  
Oh shit.

The dialogue has sketched an image of Simon sitting patiently, waiting for the intruders to awake. It is also vintage Simon: insufferably smug and sure of himself, knowing he occupies the moral high ground and taking full advantage of it.

But he is not a one-dimensional creation. In other stories we see him consoling a much younger woman who has been spurned by her lover (“In the Night”) and willingly letting his grand-daughter take advantage of his generosity just for the opportunity to spend a few moments with her (“Darkening”). In the last piece, “Who Never Wrote a Book,” the news of Simon’s death causes an unsentimental and apparently aggrieved former lover to grow wistful. The total portrait of Simon that emerges from these isolated moments is appropriately, perhaps inevitably, enigmatic and contradictory. When we learn that despite his intellectual snobbishness, inflated ego and habit of thinking well of himself Simon is actually capable of kindness, it adds a further dimension to the portrait and draws us deeper into his story.

This slim volume is a quick read and thoroughly entertaining. It is also a triumph, if perhaps a minor one. We might put the book down wondering if *Simon Says* is an exercise or challenge the author set himself, but that is really of no matter. David Helwig has demonstrated his continuing excellence, justifying the regard in which he is held by readers and scholars alike.

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Over the last twenty-five years, in numerous novels and story collections, Kenneth Radu has also shown mastery of long and short forms of fiction. His

latest book, *Earthbound*, a collection of new stories, seems a natural sequel to his previous volume, *Sex in Russia* (2010), which presented readers with a selection of stories, new and old, set here and abroad, about people groping toward an understanding of the decisions they have made and the circumstances in which they find themselves. In *Earthbound* we see the author working in a similar vein, writing about assorted characters struggling to come to terms with where life has led or is leading them, facing critical decisions and painful discoveries. Sometimes rebelling, occasionally accepting, always questioning the how and the why, Radu's characters seek and often find solace in awareness rather than action.

Some writers of fiction stay within a comfort zone. From one work to the next, they write from the same perspective or set their stories in a single region or focus on characters sharing similar traits. Radu has never favoured a *type* of character, voice or setting. His stories focus on male and female in equal measure, as well as young and old, rich and poor, educated and ignorant, experienced and sheltered, people from varied backgrounds and professions. One could say the whole world is his comfort zone. Most of the stories in *Earthbound*, if not set in Montreal or another specific city or town, take place in a recognizable North America of the here and now. But a few reach back into the past and recreate locales outside of our immediate experience. The variety is dazzling and somewhat daunting because Radu writes convincingly in all of these voices and from all of these places.

"The Ice Storm," definitely set in Montreal, uses as its central point of reference the deadly and devastating storm (or series of storms) that struck southern Quebec and eastern Ontario in January 1998, destroying the power infrastructure and paralyzing the entire region for weeks.

It is two years since the storm, and Julie and Roger are separated. Roger has been unfaithful before, but a year ago Julie walked unsuspecting into his veterinary clinic to find him in an erotic clench with his assistant. She asked him to move out, which he did. But since then she's had to deal with the misbehaviour and whining of her children, who again and again wonder aloud *When is daddy coming home*, the questions of friends and neighbours, who all adore her husband, and even the subtle criticism of her parents, who, she begins to suspect, like Roger more than they like her. From time to time Julie wonders why she couldn't forgive him yet again. She is taunted by memories of Roger's generosity and kindness during the ice storm, when he kept the family nourished, warming pots of food on the cooking surface of his wood stove, keeping the children amused as the power outage dragged on, and serving as a rock and buttress for the entire neighbourhood. To cap it all, as if to ensure she will never receive a scrap of sympathy as the wronged wife, Roger is now dying of cancer. It's all too much for Julie, and on a visit to the hospital that she is certain will be her last, in answer to his pathetic pleas that she allow him to

return home, she simply turns her back, draws the curtain around the bed and ignores his voice calling her name as she closes the door of his room behind her and is embraced by the cold air of the hospital corridor. Cruelly tuning Roger out, dismissing his wishes and casting him aside — the most effective survival tactic at her disposal — enables her to cut through the sentimental crap and envision a clear path forward through this latest disaster.

The stories in *Earthbound* often focus on a single direct conflict, such as the one between Roger and Julie. In “Preventive Measures” we witness the struggle of an elderly man to understand the provocative behaviour of his new neighbours, who make no effort to control their two Dobermans, but out of loneliness can’t bring himself to condemn them. In “Windows,” a woman, recently crippled in a car accident, is rudely interrupted by a peeping tom while taking a bath and in her struggle to escape the unwelcome exposure begins to suspect a correlation between the locked and bolted house in which she lives and the damaged body to which she is confined. And in a story set in 1920s Europe, Grand Duchess Olga Alexandrovna, sister of murdered Tzar Nicholas II, travels to Berlin to confront a young woman claiming to be her niece Anastasia, but, overcome by wistful longing for the past, finds herself wavering in her conviction that the woman is a fraud (“The Pretender”). In these and other stories Radu has selected details with great care and presented to the reader a series of events that subtly peels away protective layers, revealing his characters’ weaknesses or moral ambivalence while teasing out the drama’s universal implications. Even in the slightest of these stories the author’s sure hand is in evidence.

It makes for an intensely satisfying reading experience. In *Earthbound* Kenneth Radu has written another volume of short fiction that with admirable restraint and clarity shows how we rely upon self-deception to make our lives palatable and what can happen when our dreams and aspirations come crashing down to earth.

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Richard Cumyn has been publishing volumes of short fiction for nearly twenty years, and over five collections he has repeatedly and steadily demonstrated his mastery of the form. He has now also written two short novels, the latest of which, *Constance, Across*, shows the author stretching the boundaries of his own comfort zone and in the process spinning a compelling story of deceit and betrayal.

Constance Hardy, a high-school English teacher of early middle age, lives in suburban Ottawa with her husband, Tom, and their two teenage sons. There are problems, but nothing she can’t handle, or so she believes. She finds her job satisfying, thinks of herself as a good teacher, and regards herself as happy. Still, there is something missing. Tom is consumed by work and often

absent, and Patrick, the eldest son, lives in the basement and only interacts with her under duress. She trusts that time will work things out.

Then, within a twenty-four hour period, everything changes.

It is January. Taking the bus to work one morning she notices a colleague from her school, Afzal Khan, standing close by, and in an instant she is smitten by his physical presence. It's been so long since she felt that way, she hardly recognizes herself. Moments later the bus is involved in an accident. This in itself is shocking and traumatic. But when, after leaving the bus, they see the lifeless body of a woman in one of the stricken vehicles, she and Afzal find themselves partners in an experience that is disturbing and deeply personal. Afzal's English is rudimentary and he does not linger to talk, but Constance cannot shake thoughts of him from her mind. Later, in class, she is frustrated by the non-responsiveness of her students to an assignment she'd given them and asks one student to read his work aloud. She is then doubly frustrated — to the point of vindictiveness — when it becomes clear that he's making it up on the spot. She asks him to repeat a passage, and he cannot do it. She confronts him about his "charade" and then punishes the entire class by making them pass in the assignment immediately. Constance understands that what she has done violates basic principles of classroom fairness, but she rationalizes her extreme and uncharacteristic response to the boy's deceit by blaming it on the effects of the harrowing events she had been through earlier. The next morning she learns that the student she humiliated has committed suicide and named her in his suicide note.

This is not a straightforward narrative. Constance tells her own story in the present and past tense. It is months later and she is living in Pakistan, where she accompanied Afzal after his expulsion from Canada. Her audience is Grant Lungren, father of the dead boy, who has travelled halfway across the world seeking answers he failed to get from Constance initially, when he came to the school and she fled the encounter. Her story alternates between two narrative threads, one describing the events that took place in Ottawa and led to her decision to leave her family, her job and her life in Canada, and the other — the present-day in Lahore — revealing her new life with Afzal and his family, a life that demands that she set aside many of the habits, assumptions and attitudes — particularly the ones having to do with a woman's place in society — that she brought with her from Canada.

It bears mentioning that the scenes set in Pakistan are convincingly rendered and add an exotic flavour to a narrative that is already suspenseful, deeply probing and psychologically astute. These passages make effective use of details from Pakistani culture and custom evoking life in a country that, for many North Americans at any rate, remains profoundly foreign and mysterious.

“You waited too long,” said Malika, bringing her nose close to my hair — a boy’s cut, she scoffed, though in the interim it had grown out, into my eyes and down my jaw line on either side. It dawned on me that women wore their hair long as much for practicality as vanity, for long hair could be held back off the forehead and up off the back of the neck in the heat. My jasmine, the moyta flower, tucked behind an exposed ear, had apparently lost its fragrance.

“You must clip it before sunrise.”

*Constance, Across* tells an intricate tale that at times strains against the confines of the novella form, especially when we are presented with a closing twist that begs for further dramatic rendering of the events leading up to it. But this is more an observation than a complaint, not necessarily a drawback when you consider that many novels published these days are padded and overlong. The impact of Cumyn’s story is, if anything, heightened by its brevity; we are left wondering what the future holds for Constance, now that she has burned her bridges and repudiated her former way of life. It is fair, given her name, to suspect that she will survive, but this is hardly certain. In art, as in life, many questions remain unanswered. All we know for sure is that Richard Cumyn has written a powerful examination of the forces that conspire to make us do the things we do, and the extremes to which we will go when pushed to the wall.

— Ian Colford’s  
novel, *The Crimes of Hector Tomás*, was published in 2012.