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Refugee Sandwich: Stories of Exile and Asylum (review)

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(Review)

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The confused public space created by multiculturalism is reflected in the fictional and sociological accounts of the immigrant “experience.” The selection from Neil Bissoondath’s *On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows* and Parin Dossa’s “On Social Suffering” underline the prevalence of systemic racialism in the majority culture (both social and governmental). All that unites immigrants in Bissoondath’s writings is social and economic marginalization – residence in a run-down set of flats in the Plateau quarter of Montreal. Clark Blaise draws a comparable picture in the entirely different social milieu of Montreal’s aspiring professional immigrants, gathered together for language instruction at McGill. Inadvertent racism is deftly described by Rohinton Mistry in “Swimming Lessons,” where one individual’s fear of swimming is interpreted by an unknowing pool attendant in Toronto as an Indian cultural taboo.

These selections hold the Canadian government and society largely responsible for the marginalization of ethnic groups. But other selections, such as Fred Wah’s “From Diamond Grill,” point to a “zone of contact” between majority and minority cultures. This theme is less well represented in Cameron’s volume, perhaps reflecting a need for more research on the way ethnic identities have transformed or shaped the dominant culture. This collection does indicate that the contemporary period has brought about greater interaction, as well as confrontation, across ethnic lines. Contemporary ethnic minorities are less reluctant to voice complaints or organize sub-cultures that defy, implicitly or explicitly, the majority culture. Sometimes interpreted as a rejection of the dominant culture, this kind of political activism also suggests an assertive engagement with the majority culture that was not characteristic of an earlier era.

Clearly, a remarkable dynamic is underway. While charting the history of immigration and multiculturalism, this volume shows that multicultural policies are taking the Canadian polity in new directions. In the final contribution on “Theory,” Alan B. Simmons notes that multiculturalism is central to Canada’s “imagined future” as a “global niche player,” but its very centrality has brought about unexpected challenges to the old question of national identity and unity.

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Peter Showler. *Refugee Sandwich: Stories of Exile and Asylum*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006. 235 pp. \$27.95 sc.

There has long been a striking discrepancy between the controversy that surrounds the treatment of asylum seekers in Canada – especially by the Immigration and

Refugee Board (IRB), the independent, quasi-judicial body that hears claims for protection against persecution – and the paucity of works that add to our understanding of this policy area. Given his credentials, the author of *Refugee Sandwich* would appear to be very well-positioned to make an important contribution in this respect, and he does so in a most unexpected and marked way. Showler has worked as an immigration and refugee lawyer, been both a member of the IRB (1994-99) and its chairperson (1999-2002), and currently teaches immigration and refugee law at the University of Ottawa. Through these various experiences he has seen most every aspect of refugee determination in Canada at close quarters. However, rather than write an analysis of that process or a memoir of his experiences working within it, he has instead created a unique insider's account in the guise of a collection of short stories aimed at “illustrat[ing] the profoundly difficult process of communicating the experience of refugees within a judicial context, a difficulty that is shared by all participants” (xv). In taking this approach, *Refugee Sandwich* challenges any simplistic assessment of the work of the IRB, which tends in public discourse to be condemned for being either too generous or too cruel, and stimulates public debate on how the effectiveness and fairness of refugee determination could be increased.

The bulk of the book consists of a baker's dozen of tales, fictionalized composites that draw on Showler's own experiences, which individually and collectively explore numerous complex ethical and procedural questions that can arise in deciding who deserves Canada's protection and who does not. Although the high-stakes nature of refugee determination readily lends itself to a dramatized style, the effectiveness of this approach depends on the author's ability not only to present a compelling and informed narrative, but also to lead readers themselves to experience “the great difficulty and sometimes impossibility of deciding refugee claims accurately” (210). And in this, Showler excels. Consider, for example, “Excluding Manuel.”

Manuel is a refugee claimant suspected of complicity in crimes against humanity while serving in the police force of an unnamed country. His case has already been heard once but “due to the inability of the Board and Minister to even approximate compliance with their own procedures” (20), his initial rejection has been quashed by the courts; seven years after his arrival in Canada, his case is about to be heard again. Of the two Board members who will determine his fate, one is diligent if a little dull, while the other is lively but more concerned to reach a quick outcome than to ensure that it is the right one – both were appointed to this well-paying job more for their political connections than their expertise. If the complexity of deciding such issues as complicity were not difficult enough, Manuel has no lawyer, the interpreter has insufficient skill in Spanish, and the Immigration department's representative is unable to pose clear questions in English. After much frustration on all sides, it is eventually revealed that Manuel had on at least one occasion been involved in transferring an

individual into the hands of a secret security team that was known to torture political suspects. For at least one Board member, the claimant's complicity is evident, but his moral culpability is not so certain: "It was one thing to reject the butchers, but what about the teenagers dragooned into military service, complicit yet frightened peasants like Manuel who had never had a sense of choice or alternative in their lives" (39). Now living the life of a model immigrant in Canada, Manuel might himself be tortured if he (and his family, including three Canadian-born children) is sent back.

Showler offers few easy answers for either his characters or readers, and thus in this and many other stories the final outcome is not revealed – it is left for us to determine. In this way, he takes his audience beyond the formal legal-administrative structure of the process and presents refugee determination as a deeply human (and, therefore, often flawed) exchange as he shifts focus onto different actors and circumstances across the chapters. While the determination process is portrayed at its best and worst, underneath seems to lie, in the words of one character, a fundamental belief (or at least hope) that "[d]espite all of the differences in language, perception, and all that, ... there is always the possibility of truth. A very relative truth, mind you, but truth all the same" (93). Perhaps it is with this in mind that Showler includes an afterword to provide readers with a formal overview of the process and four key recommendations to improve its quality. This is not, however, an academic analysis, and, therefore, anyone looking for an exegesis on refugee determination will be disappointed. However, they should not be, for *Refugee Sandwich* offers academics, students, those involved in the refugee determination process, and the general public alike the chance to appreciate the real constraints at play in refugee determination, and to think about how far they might be tempered if not overcome.

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Gerhard P. Bassler. *Vikings to U-Boats: The German Experience in Newfoundland and Labrador*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006. 378 pp. \$89.00 hc.

Newfoundland and Labrador seems an unlikely locale for a book about Germans. As Gerhard Bassler acknowledges in his recent book, the non-British population in the province has always been minute. To even approach achieving his objective of uncovering the "footprints" (4) of Germans in Newfoundland and Labrador, Bassler is forced to examine a long period of time. Germans, he suggests, have been present here in some form from the arrival of the Vikings at L'Anse au Meadows, where fragmentary