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Vandal Love (review)

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(Review)

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D.Y. Bécharde. *Vandal Love*. Scarborough, ON: Doubleday Canada, 2006. 345 pp. \$29.95 hc.

D.Y. Bécharde's first novel, which won the 2007 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book, is difficult to classify as it combines the mythological, historical, social, and spiritual. At times reminiscent of Kerouac's *On the Road*, *Vandal Love* takes us all over North America. We can feel the influence of Bécharde's Franco-American background in his depiction of characters who are torn between French and English. The novel starts with a family from Québec, the Hervés — a family divided between giants and runts. We follow the descendants of these misfits as they flock to the United States or Western Canada in hopes of a better life. Do they find it? Not quite. Gigantic Jude's famous boxing career is cut short by a hand injury that will leave him destitute and miserable. His equally gigantic daughter, Isa, enters a strange platonic marriage with a much older man. She dies in a car crash. Diminutive François's self-made man approach brings him financial success but no lasting relationship. His tiny son, Harvey, will experiment with different religions without ever finding what he is really looking for.

Bécharde divides his novel into two parts. While book 1 follows the giant's line from 1946 to 1994, book 2 focuses on the smaller branch of the family from 1918 to 2006. It is hard to sum up or give an overview of *Vandal Love* because the novel deals with too many issues over too long a period of time: the hard life of Québécois labourers at the beginning of the twentieth century, interracial relationships in the United States in the 1960s, the effects of the Révolution tranquille on Québec society in the 1970s, the particular pattern of fathers raising daughters on their own and fathers abandoning their sons, the new age cult and religious experimentation of our recent *fin de siècle*, and so on. While the encyclopaedic quality of this ambitious novel is undeniable, it also suffers at times from discrepancies. The story is at its best when the author describes contemporary events that would have been familiar to him (Bécharde was born in 1974), but it falters slightly when it touches upon situations that happened before the 1980s.

When exposing the hardships faced by the Hervé family in the early 1900s, Bécharde's tone echoes the exaggerations often found in legends. For instance, the

father of the entire Hervé line is described at some point as “a large angry man staring with his one eye” (25) and his daughter, intent on not giving birth, “pummelled her belly, threw herself down hills and stairs, plunged into icy water and hurtled against low branches...The pregnancy held...” (6). Although the unfamiliar and exaggerated descriptions of life in the old days become strangely accessible through the author’s brilliant use of imagery, his rendition of a labourer’s speech fails to convey a sense of the place. Jude, who has a “simple mind” (12) and is a man of “rare words” (18), speaks a French that is a little too polished for a labourer: “Qu’est-ce...qu’on devrait faire?” (18), “C’est quoi alors . . . ces États?” (22) Béchard’s use of French is perfect, but his character should have spoken in a more colloquial manner. Notwithstanding Jude’s hesitation when speaking, his level of French does not sound *Québécois*. He uses what we call “français international.” As a result, Jude’s French could be easily transposed to France. Another discrepancy (this time geographical) occurs through Béchard’s confusion of Montreal streets and neighbourhoods. While I particularly liked the section of book 2 that takes place in Montreal in the 1970s, I was rather surprised to read that the “site for the Stade Olympique had been planned not far” (212) from De Bullion Street. François who lived “on Lionais near De Bullion” (209) even anticipated hearing “the thundering of cranes and cement trucks and jackhammers” (212) during its construction! In fact, the Stade, which is located in the eastern part of Montreal, is *not near* the very central De Bullion. One does not expect to find such discrepancies in a work that relies heavily on particular locations and specific time periods.

That being said, I found that Béchard’s prose, which often verges on the poetic, grew on me. His original use of similes, such as “she was struck by the brightness of the sky, like the blue of a television screen when the DVD clicks on” (339), and his subtle use of irony to depict characters who are willing to try anything to make sense of their lives give a very touching aspect to *Vandal Love*. At first intriguing, the title makes more sense as we realize that the possibility of filial or romantic love is almost always “vandalized” by characters who are too afraid to commit themselves. The ending, however, offers us some hope that this situation is about to change.

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