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*The Girl in Saskatoon: A Meditation of Friendship, Memory,  
and Murder* (review)

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## BOOK REVIEWS



***The Girl in Saskatoon:  
A Meditation of Friendship, Memory, and Murder.*  
By Sharon Butala.**

Toronto, ON: HarperCollins, 2008. 262 pages, \$27.95.

**Reviewed by Megan Riley McGilchrist**  
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Part murder mystery, part biography, part autobiography; a meditation on the position of women in the North American West; a story of friendship and self-discovery; an examination of the perceived fall from grace which characterizes our age, *The Girl in Saskatoon* considers questions which have always been at the heart of Butala's oeuvre. But unlike most of her work, this story takes place in an urban setting rather than the prairies of Saskatchewan. The true story of the senseless murder of a beautiful young woman, Alex Wiwcharuk, this book expresses the disquiet which

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Kenton Nelson. *DAYS AT HOME*. 2004. Oil on canvas. 24" x 30". Courtesy of the artist.

the writer felt when her world—the safe-seeming landscape of Saskatoon in the 1960s—suddenly became foreign territory, the haunt of the now all-too-familiar alienated outsider who inhabits our worst imaginings. As Butala notes, “The existence of serial killers hadn’t yet become a part of the lore of what it is to be North American” (85). She hearkens back to a more innocent time when “there was no Vietnam, no Desert Storm, no Afghanistan. ... No disappeared. No terrorists, no World Trade Center” (91). Additionally, the world of teenage girls, “a fairly newly minted class of humanity, at the outer edge of the western pioneering society,” was one in which the high points of existence were Friday dances, movies, and driving in cars with boys (114).

And yet there were other forces, unacknowledged but living under the veneer of respectability in the sheltered world Butala describes. A harsh honor code for women led to the suggestion that the murdered girl had by some questionable behavior somehow encouraged her assailant. There were suggestions of police collusion in either the murder or a cover-up, or both; and Butala’s investigations were regarded with hostility by the police, suggesting there was something to be hidden. Prior to the sexual and social revolutions of the mid-sixties, the modest freedoms and ambitions of Alex Wiwcharuk looked dangerous and attracted the sort of animosity that might have ultimately led to her death.

Descriptions of both urban and rural places have a quality of vividness and resonance which reminds the reader that in Butala’s work landscape occupies a central position and the meaning of living within a particular landscape is central to the identities of characters. This suggests that Alex Wiwcharuk’s displacement from her native landscape parallels the displacement of an independent woman in a world not ready to accept her. That this non-acceptance then ramifies into unspeakable violence is a subtext in this narrative.

*The Girl in Saskatoon* takes the reader to a more innocent time, the childhood of the age we now live in, and reveals the evil already there. It is a dark story, and Butala’s conclusion is a dark one: “Catch the murderer or never catch him, this story of evil keeps on touching people, devastating them. I see now that this story, simply, has no end” (259).

