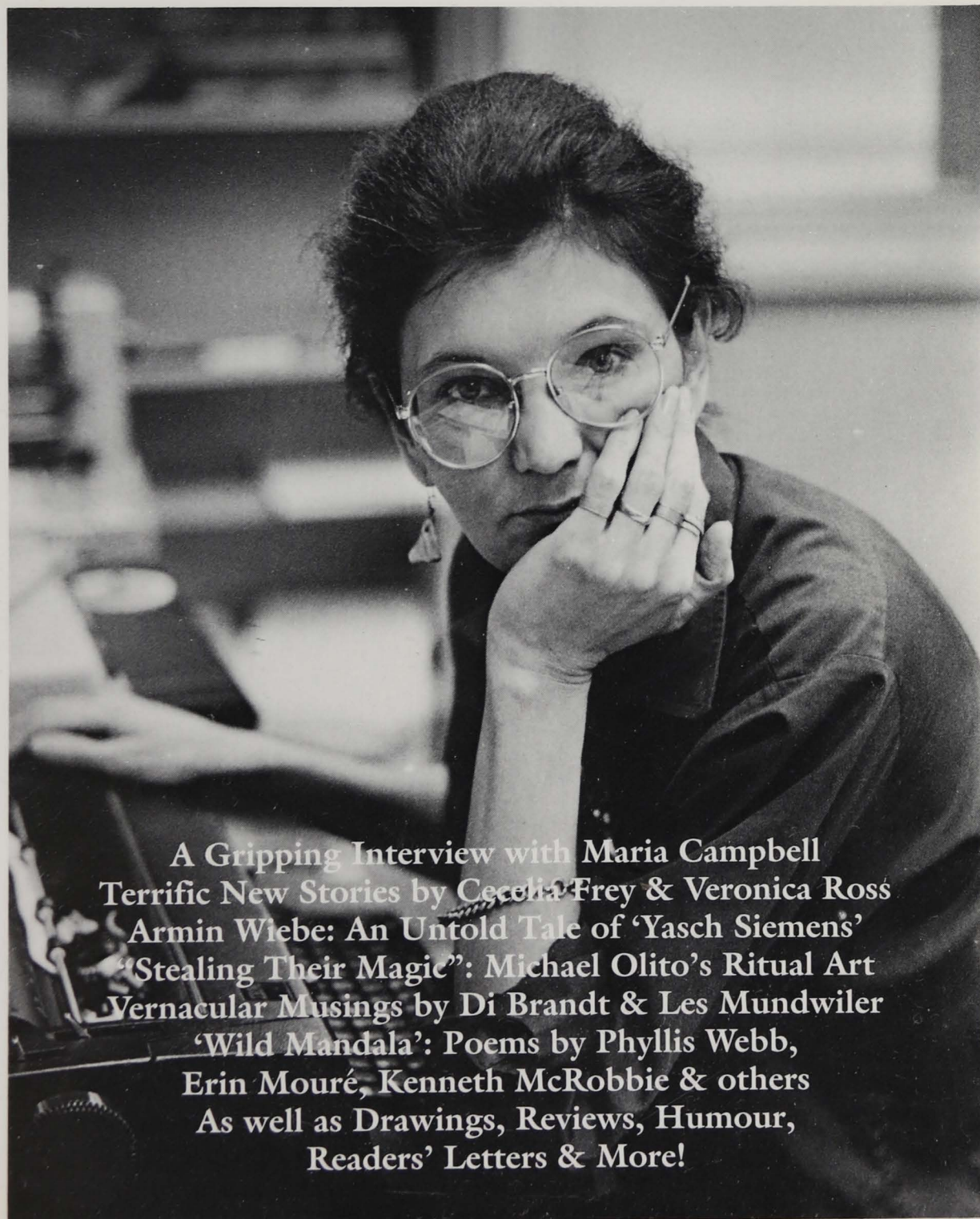


Celebrating Our Tenth Anniversary!

Special  
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# PRAIRIE FIRE

A MAGAZINE OF CANADIAN WRITING



A Gripping Interview with Maria Campbell  
Terrific New Stories by Cecelia Frey & Veronica Ross  
Armin Wiebe: An Untold Tale of 'Yasch Siemens'  
'Stealing Their Magic': Michael Olito's Ritual Art  
Vernacular Musings by Di Brandt & Les Mundwiler  
'Wild Mandala': Poems by Phyllis Webb,  
Erin Mouré, Kenneth McRobbie & others  
As well as Drawings, Reviews, Humour,  
Readers' Letters & More!

## Prairie Fire

A Magazine of Canadian Writing

Vol. IX, No. 3, Whole No. 44, September 1988

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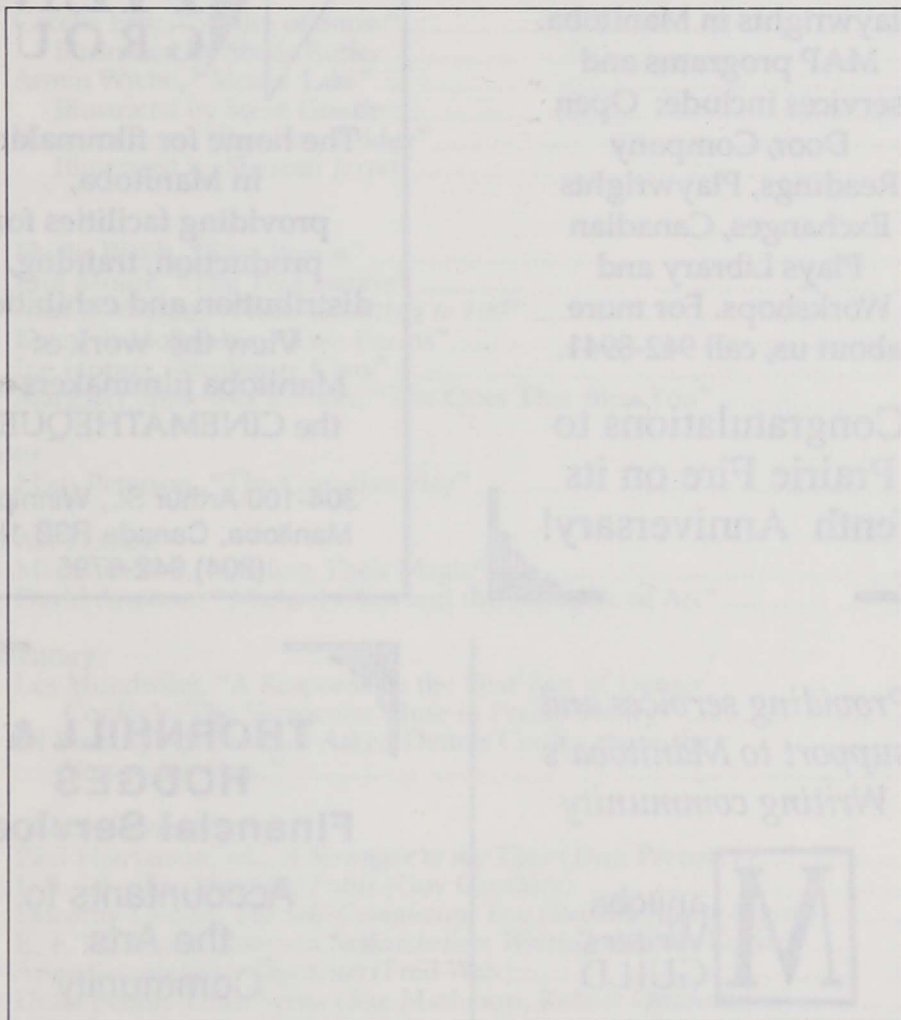




# PRAIRIE FIRE

A MAGAZINE OF CANADIAN WRITING

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*Our vernacular is laced with television vernacular, a lingo which is only obliquely related to English and which has a connectedness principally made up of logical irrelevancies and visual cliches. Against this cultural imperialism and this degradation of language, our politicians and our schools have done just about nothing.*

LES MUNDWILER

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Front Cover Photo of Maria Campbell by M.L. Clemence, courtesy of Saskatoon <i>Star Phoenix</i> .	
Back cover photo of Andrew Suknaski by Harvey Spak.	

## *At the Front Edge*

*Dogstones: Selected and New Poems* by Anne Szumigalski, Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1986, 151 pp., \$22.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper.

FRED WAH

THIS IS A SUCCESSFUL "SELECTED" collection of poems because it documents accurately the development of a writer over a major part of her writing life. *Dogstones* registers the stylistic progressions of Anne Szumigalski's poetry through four of her books over a fifteen-year period. The poems are selected from books that are highly singular in their own right (*Doctrine of Signatures* and *Instar*, both short-listed for the Governor General's award) and so there is the danger of dilution. But the selection is eventful not only in highlighting these earlier books, three of which are out of print, but in revealing a tenacious poetics open to and always pushing for perceptual and stylistic change.

The poems selected from *Woman Reading in Bath* (1974) and *A Game of Angels* (1980) are formally based on the line as a unit of composition. Szumigalski exhibits a very natural response to the line and crafts the lineal rhythm and syntax of these poems with precision. These lines from "Skeps in the Orchard," for example:

tip of a needle  
is a steel cone  
it could get broken  
into your finger sewing  
(31)

The use of the line is always more interesting when it is used to explore a syntactic possibility. In fact it is line and a skillful use of repetition that best support her "rolling, lolling play of sound" (dustjacket) as in "and was the heart an eye? / wasn't it the heart" from "The Stefan Sequence" (18). These early pieces are contextualized within image-building and the narratives they are given are perhaps their most striking features. They are full of concrete things (thorn, birchleaves, dust, kernels, string, fishhook, and so forth):

the word is grist  
          thistle  
          brush  
          cerise  
(31)

This particularization is part of a method of layering images into a suggested narrative that hints at the story but doesn't lean on it. An earlier reviewer, G.V. Downes, points out that "since the images are frequently archetypal one is always aware of the existence of myth."



In fact, *A Game of Angels* illustrates Szumigalski's strong grounding in the language of the fairy tale. The poems are a book of dreams. They make engaging use of a present tense dream voice. "Fishhawks" uses this stance in a powerful surrealism:

my son stands in waist-high water  
the salt reddens his skin  
out of his face spring wiry hairs  
thickening to a beard  
his arms have become wide and heavy  
(49)

*Doctrine of Signatures* claims about one-third of the space in this book, and rightfully so, since it is an outstanding collection. (I'll take the liberty of repeating myself here, from my essay on "Contemporary Saskatchewan Writing" in Ed Dyck's *Essays on Saskatchewan Writing*.) "There is a lot of play in the minute syllabic rhythms of the language, particularly in the lyric poems. Her prose poems extend the intensity to narrative, the minute rhythms she registers in a prose tongue. Rather than extending out to the referential, using the language to refer to the world out there, these prose poems draw the energy and attention to themselves. Certainly the writing is "about" something (motherhood, war, the imagination, and so forth) but what makes it so engaging is the interplay of narrative detail *in* the poem. It's not just the connections and image-building that stand out in the first stanza of 'Fennec' (61), for example, but the speed and compactness of the juxtapositions brought about by a disjunctive syntax:

my nibs and quills arranged before me on a stained  
deal table I am designing the alphabet for a new  
language called in that tongue *speech of the foxes*  
because the consonants fall on the ear like the yip-  
ping of reynard in the henrun because when a  
woman enunciates the vowels they sound the  
human cry of a vixen in heat

There is a shift in poetic style in *Doctrine of Signatures* that extends into *Instar*. This shift, or expanded attention, is largely generated by Szumigalski's interest in the prose poem. (Again, my earlier comments apply). "Here, in an exploration of the psychic arena, she uses a mixture of stylistic approaches to narrative. The distinction between the prose and the poem gets lost in the range of voices Szumigalski is able to explore; first and third person, narrator in/narrator out, normal concerns of stance in fiction, are as important as the play of syntax and image":

the girl thinks about this for some time    *your*  
*imagination is your own* she tells the man at last but  
don't forget that you are bound to let me know all  
your dreams and conjectures    the rule is that I  
can see everything but I am not allowed to change  
it    this seems fair and the man agrees

(122)

Many of the poems continue to make use of the present tense descriptive style already noted. But now, in *Instar*, the inclination towards the prose poem feels more like a direct attack on line and syntax. There is an impatience detectable in the disjunctive rush of image and story in most of the poetry from *Instar* on. Here's the beginning of "A Lap Full of Seeds":

*the provincial permanent home* haven't you seen that  
typed on an envelope delivered some christmas or  
other to this space no bigger than a toolshed, box  
room, candlemaker's joy now suddenly a tube  
of one-a-day pills busfare lunchmoney and *out out*  
back where you came from before these years began ...

(131)

That rush and tumble is characteristic of a small selection of new poems, the fifth section of the book, titled "Dogstones". Phrases hang suspended in a poetic syntax unrelieved by line or sentence break. The unit of the sentence, normally so much a part of storytelling, is broken up. Conventional punctuation is now totally absent. The only signalled break is the use of the space. In these recent poems Szumigalski explores phrasing as a poet, studying closely the way it can subtly generate the movement and sound of the poem. The first stanza of "The Compassion" is typical of the unique voice this intense phrasing offers:

the compassion of one whose residence is a speck  
of dust a grain of sand or salt the bubble of spit on  
the lip of the dying the one who has led us to  
believe that the word is short almost square it might  
be *come* or *go* or *desire* but nothing longer than that

(149)

Further, Szumigalski, by resisting the stylistic trends of the prose story (sentence, paragraph), has dramatized the language of the story by putting her ear to the body behind the language—the voice. This kind of attention to composition is rare among poets these days. The results are impressive in poems like "His Method" where the voice of the poem is so strong we almost get soliloquy.

Szumigalski really is a technician of the potent. *Dogstones* demonstrates the generative method of her writing, and the range of it that might not be apparent within a single volume; the selection reveals more than a part. Each gesture in the writing has created the ground for the next writing and she is a valuable poet because of this. She is always at the front edge of her writing and perception. 🐾



## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

*David Arnason's* most recent book is *Skrag* (Turnstone Press, 1987).

*Brenda Austin-Smith* writes and teaches in Antigonish, N.S.

*Di Brandt's* first book, *Questions i asked my mother* (Turnstone, 1987) was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award for Poetry.

*John Butler* is an intellectual historian specializing in the seventeenth century at the University of Manitoba.

*Sheila Butler* is a painter who lives and works in Winnipeg. She has taught at the University of Winnipeg and the University of Manitoba and is currently a member of the board of Ace Art, a parallel gallery.

*Scott Ellis* is a Winnipeg writer. His criticism has appeared in *Midcontinental*, *Vanguard*, and *Border Crossings*.

*Cecelia Frey's* most recent book is a collection of stories, *The Nefertiti Look* (Thistledown Press, 1987). Ms. Frey is the present business manager of *Dandelion* in Calgary.

*Guy Gauthier* is a poet and playwright living in New York.

*Steve Gouthro* is an artist who also teaches at the University of Manitoba School of Fine Art.

*Doris Hillis* is the author of a collection of poems, *The Prismatic Eye* (Thistledown, 1985) and a collection of interviews with Saskatchewan writers, *Voices & Visions* (Coteau Books, 1985). *Voices & Visions II* is forthcoming this fall.

*Jan Horner's* first collection of poems, *Recent Mistakes*, was published this spring by Turnstone. A revised version of "Sculpture Class" appears in that volume.

*Shereen Jerrett* is a filmmaker and illustrator who also is the president of the Winnipeg Film Group.

*Martin Kuester* is a student of Canadian literature living in Augsburg, F.R.G.

*Sue Matheson* is a Ph.D. student in English at the University of Manitoba. This summer she presented papers in Morocco and California.

*Kenneth McRobbie's* last publications in book form were *Hole* (Fiddlehead Poetry Books, 1980), and, with his wife, from the Hungarian a translation of Miklós Radnóti's prose-poem *Under Gemini* (Ohio Press, 1985). He teaches cultural history at the University of Manitoba.

*Maurice Micrau* is a Winnipeg writer whose work has appeared recently in *Grain* and *The New Quarterly*. He writes a monthly column on books for *Midcontinental*.

*Erin Mouré* lives in Montreal where she works for VIA Rail. Her most recent book of poems is *Furious* (Anansi, 1988).

*Les Mundwiler* is a poet and critic who runs Highbrow Books in Winnipeg.

*Michael Olito's* sculptures, rituals and performances have captured the imagination of art lovers and critics for over ten years.

*Ellen Peterson* is a Winnipeg actor who has been seen in productions at MTC's Warehouse Theatre, Actor's Showcase and with the improv group Theatre X. She was last seen at the Winnipeg Fringe in the Evening Cabaret and the drama *refugees*. She holds a B.A. in Theatre from the University of Winnipeg.

*Don Precosky* teaches English at the College of New Caledonia in Prince George, B.C.

*Robert Quickenden* reviews books for the *Winnipeg Free Press* and *Border Crossings*.

*Veronica Ross* lives and writes in Thunder Bay. Her books include *Fisher Woman* (Pottersfield Press, 1984) and *Homecoming* (Oberon Press, 1987).

*Margaret Shaw-MacKinnon* is a Ph.D. student in English at the University of Manitoba. She has written and illustrated a children's book, *Pod the Wood Elf* (Queenston House, 1978).

*Fred Wah* won the 1986 Governor General's Award for Poetry for *Waiting for Saskatchewan* (Turnstone). His most recent book is *Music at the Heart of Thinking* (RDC Press, 1987).

*Phyllis Webb* won the 1982 Governor General's Award for poetry for *The Vision Tree*. Her most recent book is *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti-Ghazals* (Coach House, 1984).

*Armin Wiebe* is the author of *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* (Turnstone, 1984) which is being made into a movie.

*Alan R. Wilson* was born in New Brunswick and attended the universities of New Brunswick and Victoria, where he studied physics, astronomy and creative writing. He has worked at the Dominion Astrophysical Observatory and is currently employed at the University of Victoria. *Counting to 100* reached the finals of the 1985 CBC literary competition. Selections have appeared in *The Malahat Review*, *The Antigoneish Review*, and *Canadian Literature*.

*Noah Zacharin* is a poet, critic and musician who now lives in Toronto. ☺

## Errata & Endnotes

AN EDITORIAL DECISION to simplify the title of Joan Clark's story from "Point No Point Mermaid" to "Point No Point" resulted in the appearance of both versions of the title in our last issue. *Prairie Fire* apologizes for its confusion.

Long-time book reviews editor Howard Curle has resigned, citing the pressure of his many other commitments. Maurice Mierau has accepted to replace Mr. Curle as book reviews editor. Book reviews in our last issue were edited by Mr. Curle but were attributed incorrectly to Mr. Mierau. *Prairie Fire* regrets this error.

Kristjana Gunnars has resigned as poetry editor of *Prairie Fire* after serving in that capacity for nearly four years. Ms. Gunnars, who recently moved to Regina, cited her many other commitments as well as forthcoming travel plans among her reasons for stepping down. Ms. Gunnars' selections will continue to appear in *Prairie Fire* for the rest of this year. A new poetry editor has not yet been appointed.

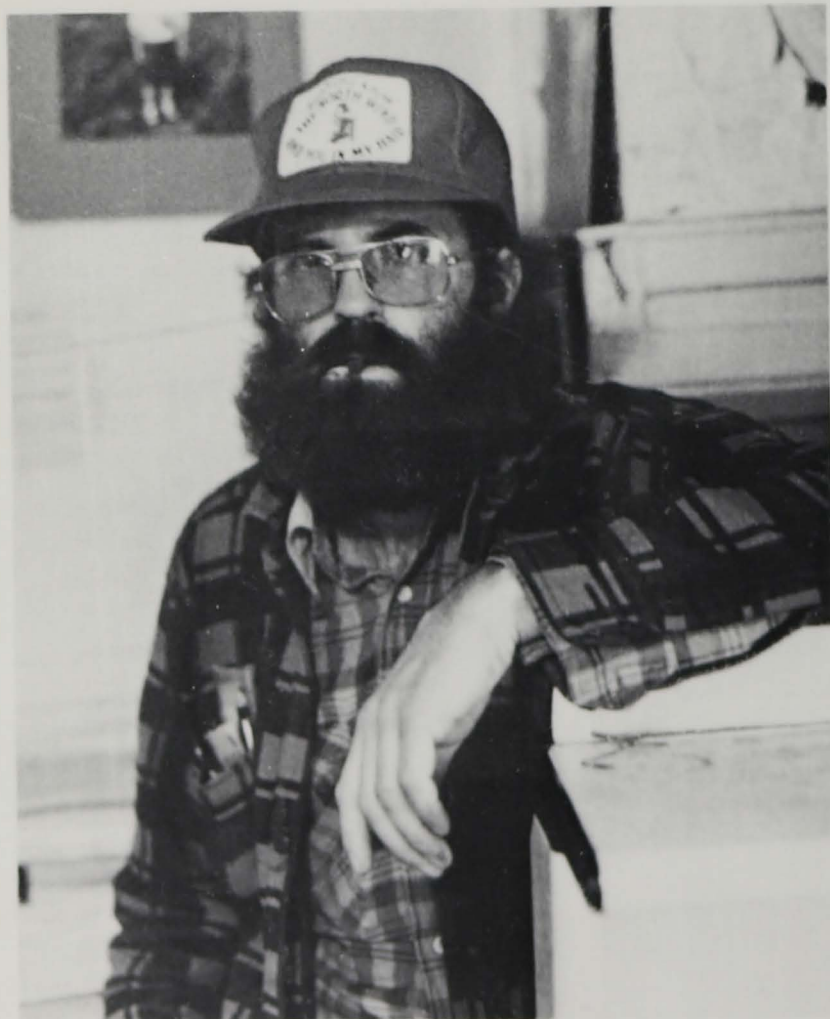
All best wishes, Howard and Kristjana!

The first issue of *Writers News Manitoba* (now *Prairie Fire*) was published in July of 1978. This current issue marks our 10th Anniversary and is dedicated to all the people who were there at the beginning or who joined us over the years, and especially to Katharine Bitney and Elizabeth Carriere who started it all. Thank you! ☺



## In Upcoming Issues:

A searching interview with Andrew Suknaski; art by Arthur Adamson; fiction by Inge Moore, Sarah Murphy & Margaret Sweatman; poetry by Judith Krause, Gary Hyland & Glen Sorestad; reviews by Gillian Harding Russell, Joy Kuropatwa & Bruce Whiteman; and much, much more!



### This Issue:

David Arnason  
Brenda Austin-Smith  
Di Brandt  
John Butler  
Sheila Butler  
Maria Campbell  
Scott Ellis  
Cecelia Frey  
Guy Gauthier  
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