

SHORT FICTION

RACE MATTERS

Two collections of short stories address the divisive nature of racism at home and abroad

Lives: Whole and Otherwise

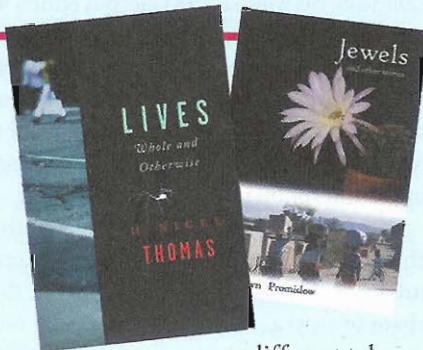
H. Nigel Thomas; \$20.95 paper 978-1-89477-061-3, 160 pp., 5½ x 8½, TSAR Publications, Oct. Reviewed from finished book

Jewels and Other Stories

Dawn Promislow; \$20.95 paper 978-1-89477-065-1, 112 pp., 5½ x 8½, TSAR Publications, Sept. Reviewed from finished book

As Canadians, we frequently pride ourselves on our social tolerance and inclusiveness. The cultural mosaic has become one of the country's foundational myths, and our three most populous urban centres – Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal – are homes to flourishing immigrant communities living alongside one another in harmony and respect.

At least, that is the accepted version of things. Mr. John Ashtone, one of the characters in H. Nigel Thomas's story "My People! My People!" might beg to differ. Ashtone, the chairman of the Black



Association for Justice and Equality in Montreal, is visited by activist Adolphe Francis, who is attempting to overturn a not-guilty verdict in a contentious trial, in which the white proprietor of a city *dépanneur* shot a black man caught shoplifting a litre of milk. Francis wants justice for the victim, who was left paralyzed from the waist down. Ashtone has a somewhat

different take on the matter: "Man look at your skin and look at mine, You think the powers that be let you and me come to live here to get justice?"

Ashtone vocalizes the seething discontent that roils beneath the surface of Montreal's urbane facade. It is this same discontent that allows a city councillor to refer to the predominantly black Côte-des-Neiges region as "the anus of the city" in the story "Maude," and, in "Graduations," informs the decision to award the protagonist's son a diploma from a technical high school even though the young man can't read the words printed on the document.

Thomas's prevailing concern is the various ways in which his immigrant characters are compelled to struggle against the forces – both institutional and personal – holding them down. Whether it's the title character's fractured mental state (a result, at least in part, of his repressed homosexuality) in "Percy's Illness," or the depredations visited on a woman by her abusive husband in "Bankruptcy," the lives that Thomas's characters find themselves heir to do not often reflect the comfortable platitudes we so often mouth about our tolerant society.

In this regard, Thomas's stories are comparable to the work of another chronicler of Montreal's racial disharmony: Rawi Hage. Unfortunately, Thomas lacks Hage's literary virtuosity: a number of these stories employ awkward and unwieldy approaches. "Percy's Illness," for example, is framed as a conversation between a woman and a gay-rights activist to whom she's come for advice. It's not clear what advantage this intrusive structure has. And the story about the *dépanneur* shooting is related via newspaper clippings – a hoary and ineffective means of getting essential information across to readers.

Such difficulties are largely absent from Dawn Promislow's debut collection, *Jewels*, which also addresses racial strife, this time in a more obvious milieu: 1970s Apartheid-era South Africa. Promislow's stories are short, almost impressionistic glimpses of a society that thrives on repression but maintains the outward trappings of civility. A black governess accompanies her white charges

to the sea, which she has never seen before. The pool cleaner for a wealthy white family makes a fatal error in judgment while his employers are away. A servant observes the dissolution of the marriage between her master and his severely depressed wife.

Although South Africa's Apartheid regime was more blatantly racist than Canada's multicultural mosaic, Promislow makes clear that racial matters between blacks and whites were rarely addressed in the open. This is demonstrated in the story "Secret," when officers from Special Branch, the police unit used to quell resistance to Apartheid, abduct an illegal worker from the shop where he was working. "It's a secret," the narrator says of the brutally repressive societal order. "It's everywhere." It's a secret that must eventually boil over: the final story features a 17-year-old black boy heading off to become a freedom fighter.

Promislow's stories are subtly wrought, and her language is plain yet polished. The stories display certain technical problems: the opening story shifts perspective jarringly when the family leaves the pool man alone in the house, and too many stories begin with the same kind of formulaic, declarative sentence ("I went to the hairdresser today"; "The river journeyed its way across plains of scrub"), which lends the collection a thudding, repetitive quality.

But Promislow's sensitivity to the ways in which emotionally charged social interactions are sublimated and unacknowledged imbues her stories with a depth and resonance that belies the slimness of this volume. – *Steven W. Beattie, Q&Q's review editor.*