

salonbooks

No man is an island



MICHAEL HIGGINS
mysteries & mystics

The American Eastern Orthodox theologian and spiritual writer Steve Theodore Georgiou is nothing if not both prolix and orotund as a writer, but he is also staggeringly insightful and worth reading for his acute probes of the transcendent. With *The Isle of Monte Cristo* he has just published the final volume of his trilogy, following *The Way of the Dreamcatcher: Spirit-Lessons with Robert Lax* and *Mystic Street: Meditations on a Spiritual Path*.

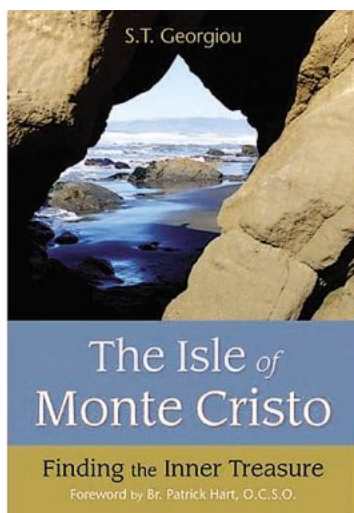
The organizing principle behind the trilogy is the writer's spiritual search for meaning and emotional integration. Nothing unusual in that, save perhaps that a chap as young as Georgiou writing a spiritual autobiography of such length has about it something of the grand ambition of Thomas Merton's phenomenally influential *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948). Although Georgiou's first volume placed a disproportionately marked emphasis on the self-referential (admittedly a natural pitfall when writing a spiritual autobiography), the author is not tech-

A SERIES OF THEMATICALLY AND CHRONOLOGICALLY CONNECTED PENSÉES THAT HAVE A DISTINCTLY AND PREDOMINANTLY AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FLAVOUR.

nically writing a formal autobiography at all. This is a series of thematically and chronologically connected pensées that have a distinctly and predominantly autobiographical flavour.

The title of the last installment of the trilogy is clearly intended to draw parallels with Alexandre Dumas's novel *The Count of Monte Cristo* – with its tragic and heroic tale of false imprisonment, escape, revenge and personal redemption. Dumas's protagonist, Edmund Dantes, unjustly accused and condemned to solitary confinement on the infamous prison island, the Chateau d'If, comes to realize that his true escape from the nightmarish imprisonment that is hate can only come about through a radical re-evaluation of his life.

Georgiou observes: "How can this epic spiritual story be allegorically applied to ourselves? Like Dantes many of us have, at some point in our lives, felt betrayed, falsely accused, perhaps even victimized. Somehow



The Isle of Monte Cristo: Finding the Inner Treasure by S. T. Georgiou, Novalis, 299 pages

the Chateau d'If – that is, the cold, hard world – has transformed our innocence and idealism into a grim discontent that has left us numb, alienated from our own hearts. And then, perhaps in our most intolerable hour, someone or something enters our existence, gives us hope, and shows us a way out of the darkness and into the light. This liberation may be initiated through the insight and compassion of a friend, teacher, perhaps a stranger; this freedom may be generated through a book, a song, even a spirited word or smile."

Georgiou's liberation was effected by an extraordinary mentor, spiritual master and dear friend: Robert Lax. A respected poet (his obituary in *The New York Times* nicely underscored the failure of the U.S. literary establishment to take seriously one of the genuinely revolutionary poets of his era), Lax was also a visionary-hermit whose charismatic personality stamped a generation with spiritual integrity. Georgiou travelled to the island of Patmos in Greece following a personal crisis in the early 1990s. Patmos is the holy isle of St. John the Evangelist, the isle of the Apocalypse, the ancient and venerable island that for decades served as the quasi-monastic habitation for Lax. It was on this island that Georgiou found consolation in his pain, direction in his confusion, focus in his chaos. He discovered Lax.

But he also discovered himself. And so *The Isle of Monte Cristo* introduces the reader to Georgiou's potpourri of friends and acquaintances – some of whom include Demetrios, Galatea, Jackie and Nick of the Dunes – drawn from his visits to Patmos, from his colleagues and co-religionists in California (he is a lecturer at San Francisco City College, San Francisco State University and the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley) and from the people he meets through chance encounters roaming the beaches, hugging the harbours and climbing the mountains.

The Isle of Monte Cristo is suffused with the energy, enthusiasm and innocence of a quester who sees the mystical in the ordinary, God in the unfolding cosmic drama of creation, love in the simple epiphanies of beauty, goodness and truth. §

Michael W. Higgins is vice-president for mission and Catholic identity at Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Conn. He is a former president of St. Thomas University.

A mischievous intrigue

The influential Acadian painter Roméo Savoie transitions from modern art to magic realism in his first novel. Review by Jo-Anne Elder

Le mensonge caméléon (*The Chameleon Lie*) is Roméo Savoie's first novel. Savoie is a pioneer of modernist Acadian art. Now in his 80s, he has created more than 4,000 paintings. He was recently invested in the Order of Canada and, over the years, has won every prestigious prize New Brunswick has to offer visual artists: the Miller Brittain, the Strathbutler, the Éloize Artist of the Year, the Prix Hommage, last year's Lieutenant-Governor's Award for High Achievement in the Arts and an honorary doctorate from the Université de Moncton. His groundbreaking artwork continues to stretch and stimulate the viewer's imagination.

As a writer, Savoie has published essays, articles and six collections of poetry, among them *Une lointaine Irlande* (2001), *Trajets dispersés* (1989), and *Duo de démesure* (1981). His poetry shares the quiet assurance and rich texture we admire in his artwork.

But even knowing Savoie's far-reaching talents, his novel took readers by surprise. Actually, the novel happened almost by accident. Several years ago, when Savoie could not get visual arts funding to work with one of his mentors in Barcelona, he found some pages he had tucked away and applied to write a novel.

The funding agency was absolutely right to support his project. Luck might have been involved, too, though. A mischievous play of unlikely coincidences and stories-within-stories pushes this book towards magic realism.

The book has four parts – each written in a different style – and an epilogue. The first part is written from the first person point of view of Robert, and consists of 35 sections. Many read like prose poems, drawing on Savoie's well-established skills. The familiar story of a breakup at first seemed uneven and lacking in narrative drive. Early in the second part, though, I became intrigued. (Intrigue, by the way, is the French word for plot.) A new narrator, George, again writing in the first person, has found the story of Robert and Esthèle we have just read and wants to include it in a novel he is writing. Ostensibly seeking the author's permission, he



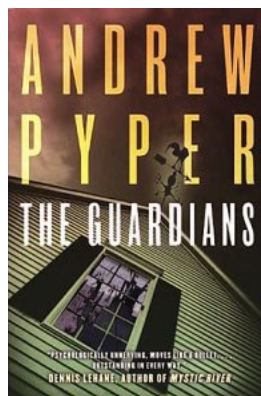
Le mensonge caméléon by Roméo Savoie, Perce-Neige, 150 pages

sets out to learn what has happened to the lovers. The reader is pulled along, complicit in his unhealthy fascination, as George uncovers deceptions and mysterious twists and writes the story of their story. Occasionally he over-thinks the situation, offering the reader lessons about love and lies.

Savoie once said that "making art is a very difficult profession because it deals with what is not obvious, what is hidden in one's emotions, it deals with life itself and everyone knows that life is unpredictable, that it reveals its secrets bit by bit, that nothing is clear, ever." Although the sophisticated composition of Savoie's first novel is admirable, we are ultimately attracted by something far more accessible and compelling: the unpredictable but familiar lives of intriguing people. §

Jo-Anne Elder is a writer, editor and literary translator who lives in Fredericton and teaches in Moncton.

The Guardians by Andrew Pyper, Doubleday, 362 pages



"Every small town has a second heart, smaller and darker than the one that pumps the blood of good intentions," writes Andrew Pyper in *The Guardians*. "We alone know that the picture of home cooking and oak trees and harmlessness is false."

The "we" Pyper is referring to is the quartet of high school buddies

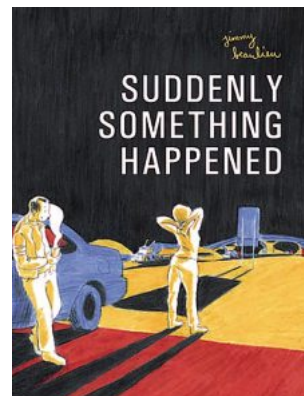
Carl, Randy, Ben and, his main protagonist, Trevor. The town is Grimshaw, a farming community off the highway between Toronto and Detroit where the boys grew up. It's also the hometown Tevor made a promise never to go back to.

The Guardians alternates between Trevor's return to Grimshaw and his secret memory diary of the winter of '84. It's a haunted house story and Pyper delivers legitimate chills and scares. Secrets and mystery dangle like a just-out-of-reach carrot in each chapter.

For fans of Stephen King's coming-of-age horror stories, such as *It*, *The Body*, *The Talisman* or *Christine*, Pyper's titular Guardians may come up short. Pyper's follow-up to his national bestseller *The Killing Circle* feels like one long foreshadow until the secret is revealed and the mystery solved. The scares are certainly here, but any reflection and examination by Pyper of life in small town Ontario is lost. §

Mike Landry, *Telegraph-Journal*

Suddenly Something Happened by Jimmy Beaulieu, Conundrum, 240 pages



Life requires an element of risk – taking a chance despite the possibility of failure. Many of us get stuck, become stagnant and forget how to believe in ourselves. Often it's a situation or circumstance that throws us unwillingly into change: heartbreak. Jimmy

Beaulieu's first book in English narrates the internal and external shift of his life in Quebec City to the balconies of Montreal. The city propelled his professional life, his creativity and his heart while reflecting on the place he once called home.

Suddenly Something Happened is a story for anyone who yearns, but isn't quite sure what for. With the back drop of Ville-Marie, Beaulieu's coming-of-age tale reminds readers whatever seems risky is most often worth it. While the myriad of 20-something culture is riddled with what-ifs, maybes and splashes of perhaps, Beaulieu's book chronicles a character's journey from anxious ridden self-doubt to a general acceptance of life's ebbs and flows.

When the clamour of late nights and bars fade, Beaulieu aptly describes the cozy, yet lonely nights of drinking at home, longing for partnership, the nourishment of good sustaining friends and how true love eventually comes in the end.

As an autobiographical graphic novel, *Suddenly Something Happened* beautifully combines narrative and visuals. Beaulieu's sketches are subtle and quick, filling in where words don't suffice. With humour and substance, Beaulieu captures what it means to wonder, to ask questions and slowly live into some of the answers. §

Shannon Webb-Cambell for the *Telegraph-Journal*

News: Postcards from the Four Directions by Drew Hayden Taylor, Talon, 288 pages



Almost 100 'postcards' make up this collection of Drew Hayden Taylor's "personal musings, wanderings, impressions of the Native community, as well as many other communities in Canada and the world." Although the topics range from Aboriginal science fiction to the Olympics and trying to find mortadella in Curve Lake, the Ojibway novelist, playwright and screen-

writer is always exploring "the complexities of Native identity and perceptions of Native peoples by others."

Taylor's observations and musings are endlessly interesting and surprising, and almost always funny. Particularly amusing is Taylor's struggle with the fact he's "gone from being a Rez Indian, to being an Urban Indian – even to, and I say this with great trepidation, an Urbane Indian," sipping margaritas on the Connecticut coastline. But like any good comedian, Taylor's real gift lies in using his humour to reveal troubling truths.

News can be a bit dense and repetitive all at once. But good comedy is all about timing, and *News*, read in snippets, delivers the special combination of being gut-bustingly funny while leaving you with deep realities to mull. §

Mike Landry, *Telegraph-Journal*

New Brunswick's reading

Hardcover, fiction

1. **Vinyl Cafe Notebooks** by Stuart McLean (Penguin)
2. **Freedom** by Jonathan Franzen (HarperCollins)
3. **Sanctuary** by Jane Urquhart (McClelland & Stewart)
4. **The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest** by Stieg Larsson (Penguin)
5. **The Help** by Kathryn Stockett (Putnam)

Paperback, fiction

1. **The Sentimentalists** by Johanna Skibsrud (Douglas & McIntyre/Gaspereau)
2. **The Sea Captain's Wife** by Beth Powning (Vintage)
3. **Player One** by Douglas Coupland (Anansi)
4. **Bury Your Dead** by Louise Penny (Little Brown)
5. **The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo** by Stieg Larsson (Penguin)

The top-selling books this week at Westminster Books, 445 King St., Fredericton, (800) 561-7323, 454-1442, www.westminsterbooks.com.

Non-fiction, hardcover

1. **Top 100 Canadian Singles** by Bob Mersereau (Goose Lane)
2. **Atlantic** by Simon Winchester (HarperCollins)
3. **How the Scots Invented Canada** by Ken McGoogan (HarperCollins)
4. **At Home: A Short History of Private Life** by Bill Bryson (Random House)
5. **Life** by Keith Richards (Little Brown)

Non-fiction, paperback

1. **Waterfalls of New Brunswick: A Guide** by Nicolas Guitard (Goose Lane)
2. **Ben and Me** by Cameron Gunn (Penguin)
3. **Building a University** by John Leroux (Goose Lane)
4. **Sanctuary** by Deborah Carr (Goose Lane)
5. **Long Ago and Far Away** by Wayne Curtis (Pottersfield)