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The Plotline Bomber of Innisfree by Josh Massey

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Elk, Balance, and Transition: Exploring the Dystopian Canadian Future

The Plotline Bomber of Innisfree by JOSH MASSEY

BookThug, 2015 \$20.00

Reviewed by **DESSA BAYROCK**

“When the land is swept up in non-local forces it means a vendetta of the heart, an uprising in the blood against the takers of the shiny recollection. Livelihood of cherries on a withering tree. Cradle land. Connection so strong it persists like experience of infancy in the aging voice. The radicals sprout from the site of erasure.”

(Bomber’s note, 30)

Innisfree is a small town in the cartographic mistake of Enderbee, a tract of land forgotten when the provinces of “Cowberta” and “PC Columbia” redrew their borders. As the novel opens, Enderbee has become an experiment in self-governance, and a place for oddballs, farmers, and artists—such as Jeremy Inkster, protagonist, elk farmer—to band together into a ramshackle community. With this, Massey creates an absurd and ominous Canada (“Can’tada”) of the near-future: a world as disorienting as it is complex, as matter-of-factly foreign and alienating as it is familiar.

Because it is familiar, the problems Massey plays with are monstrous and inflated versions of issues eternally faced by the West Coast. What are the ramifications of pipelines and tankers? Why do so many of Canada’s citizens seem unconcerned with the seeming inevitability of progress—and the implications on the natural world?

In Innisfree, pipelines are floated in the air by “perpetual helium,” or sunk into the riverbeds by “submersible supertube” (90, 89). But the idea of a new pipeline snaking through the forests and farms of Enderbee has its residents on edge. Inkster, in particular, uneasily recalls an incident in which an oil truck crashed on a corner of his property, spilling its load of crude into the underbrush and driving away his wife and son, who became sick and poisoned by the spill. In contrast, Inkster offhandedly notes that he “inhaled the fumes and it had no particular effect,”—and yet as the novel continues we are left to wonder just how this ecological event may have mutated Inkster into something new (170). Could Inkster be the bomber behind a series of attacks on the new pipeline? What, exactly, is the nature of the ominous undercurrent running through the nature-loving community of Innisfree—and what will happen when this ominous force finally emerges into the daylight?

“Nobody likes to be infiltrated, occupied, run through by metal conduit,” Inkster says. “So it seems it is not a question of who did, but maybe who didn’t do it” (97). Questions of authenticity and what is natural rest at the heart of the novel. What does it mean to be authentic to yourself or to a belief? To be natural within a landscape or a community, or a nation? The resulting Venn diagram resembles nothing as much as it does the tangled nest of antlers and superimposed explosion on the cover. Can humankind be “natural” within the natural world? Or are we doomed—like these characters—to destroy the planet, believing all the while that we do our best to honour and preserve it?

Take, for instance, an art installation constructed and explained by one of Innisfree’s resident artists: a series of

wooden columns topped by sports balls. She explains it as a conversation about identity—the fact that an individual is composed of many different selves, masks donned and abandoned depending on the circumstances. “And it is also my way of telling the forces that be that if you fuck with the land,” she adds, “you fuck with me” (35). This seems like an admirable sentiment—and yet, by putting up these pillars and mass-produced sports equipment, she, too, is “fucking” with the land and changing it to suit her vision of what it ought to be. Here we face the key question of this novel: its conflict centres around the violence of the eponymous bomber, and yet destruction was inherent in the community long before the pipeline was announced.

The protagonist’s elk farm might serve as the best example of destruction hidden behind a self-effacing façade. Jeremy Inkster specializes in harvesting “velvet antlers,” and at first this sounds soothing, soft, and lovely. And this harvest requires sawing through the antlers before they calcify, while they’re still growing, while the elk still feel and bleed through the hacked-off stumps; Inkster offhandedly describes the pillory-like device needed to pin the elk down and the horrific sounds of their cries as he removes their antlers. It becomes clear that the seemingly blissful natural world of this hippy community is not immune to the violence of capitalism; the violence of progress is present even in the communities and individuals who purport to resist progress. This echoes the hypocrisy at the heart of Innisfree: its inhabitants move to Enderbee to get away from “civilisation,” but by moving into the (perceived) wilderness, they civilise it.

And so our soft-spoken protagonist becomes almost hypocritical in his

righteousness; he declares Innisfree is built on trust, “foundations stronger than money,” and accuses the pipeline of aiming “to break apart the bonds that hold the trust, through trying to plot the poetry of the town and country, which is how bad things happen with counties and countries and all land under the sun” (61). The subtext, here, implies the system and structure of community is authentic, honourable, honest, when in fact the community might be just as worthy of critique as the pipeline that threatens to bisect it. Inkster fervently believes Innisfree is natural in a way that other cities are unnatural, when in fact Enderbee residents themselves have twisted the natural world into unnatural shapes. And this brings to mind the question inherent in the name of the community in the first place: Innisfree? Isn’t this free? The answer is that it both is, and isn’t; Innisfree residents and real-life Canadian readers alike will recognise the ubiquity and difficulty of this conundrum.

DESSA BAYROCK is an ex-journalist studying at Carleton University in Ottawa, where she is currently working on a Master’s thesis discussing Canadian literature and apocalyptic fiction. Her work has appeared in *The Loudon Singletree*, *People Holding*, and *APRICITY Press*; she regularly reviews books with *The Ottawa Review of Books* and on her blog *Bayrock, Bookrock*.