Ever upward

Sawbones memorial
Sinclair Ross
Edmonton: University of Alberta Press; 2002
152 pp $16.95 (paper) ISBN 0-88864-354-3

Sinclair Ross's portrayal of Doc Hunter's retirement party in Upward, Saskatchewan, has been sitting on my bookshelf for a quarter of a century pretty much undisturbed, apart from various household relocations in that time. I first read it in my premedical years — not "pre-med" as in university courses, but as in the time before I had any notion of becoming a physician. It was one of the novels I discussed in my MA thesis. In those days I was interested in the isolation of its country-doctor protagonist, one of a number of isolated elderly characters in modern Canadian fiction.

Originally published by McClelland and Stewart in 1974, *Sawbones Memorial* is one of three works by Ross that the University of Alberta Press has just brought back into print. More novella than novel, it is one of the later works of Ross, who is better known for *As For Me and My House*, his 1941 novel about life on the prairies. Then, as now, the art of writing fiction was less than lucrative for most who attempted it. Ross, like his contemporary, the Canadian poet Raymond Souster, supported himself by working in a bank for most of his life and presumably wrote in his "spare" time.

Doc "Sawbones" Hunter is retiring, and the townspeople have turned out to give him a send-off. It's not only his retirement party, but also his 75th birthday, and 45 years to the day that he arrived as the new doctor in Upward. Not coincidentally, it's also the opening of the new Hunter Memorial Hospital. The hospital is not quite ready to welcome its first patient, just as the townspeople are not quite ready to welcome Hunter's replacement.

The story unfolds through a series conversations, gossip sessions, informal interviews and interior monologues. Like the daily, repeating conversations that form the soundscape of medical practice, they piece together an oral history of the life and work of this solo practitioner. Notes I scribbled 25 years ago in the margins of the book helped me to identify again the individual voices and keep track of the main characters, whose stories are woven into the fabric of small-town life. The reader hears, among others, the voices of Caroline, an English war bride; her husband, Dunc, a successful farmer and president of the hospital board; the Reverend Grimble, whose church the agnostic doctor chooses not to attend; piano-playing Benny, the product of a premarital liaison that contributed 10 years later to his mother's fatal overdose; Mrs. Harp, local gossip and bigot; and the Ukrainian immigrant outsiders Big Anna and her son Nick, "the Hunky." To the surprise of some and the disgust of others, Nick is soon to return to Upward as Hunter's replacement. The small-town setting and the exclusive use of the spoken word are reminiscent of Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*.

The doctor's career spans the years from 1903 to 1948 and thus two world wars, the 1918 flu epidemic and the Great Depression. This was the time before modern technology, pharmaceuticals and medical insurance. As Harry (friend of the doctor) relates to Dan (editor of the *Upward Chronicle*): "The other day I heard somebody say all he's ever been good for is telling you to take aspirin and keep your bowels open." Those were the days when a doctor's diagnostic and therapeutic armamentarium was often as limited as many patients' ability to pay for it. The doctor was sometimes paid in chickens or butter, sometimes not at all. Dr. Hunter expanded this precursory alternative payment plan to include calves and eventually built himself a good-sized herd, a questionable practice in the view of some of his neighbours.

Ross shows us the best and the worst of rural attitudes and culture. Gratitude, good will and spontaneous acts of kindness are often corroded by prejudice, narrow-mindedness and spite. Voices of common sense and compassion can be easily drowned out by the shouts of the self-righteous or undermined by the ignorant whispers of bigots.

In conversation with the Reverend, Doc Hunter admits that he's not much of a philosopher. His time "has been pretty well taken up with the practical problems of the job." Nevertheless, he articulates a view of the universe as a battle between "creative intelligence on the one side and mindless destruction on the other" — the same forces that clash repeatedly in the microcosm of Upward. The preacher finds this vision too bleak, partly because he, along with most of the residents of Upward, is unable to recognize Doc Hunter in his final role as mediator of these opposing forces. Hunter, for personal and professional reasons, has facilitated Nick's return to the community. He is the retiring doctor's ironic memorial to the past and his connection with the future.

And what about the isolation of Dr.

Hunter, which I reconsider now as a physician reader? My original notes suggest I failed in my first reading to appreciate the extent of professional isolation experienced by someone in those days trying to balance the various roles of physician, judge, preacher, husband and father. It can be doubly difficult to play a god whose existence you question. Perhaps it is pointless to try. Dr. Hunter has been a solitary figure through much of his working life, and it appears that isolation will also characterize his retirement: "When you're 75 and your work's behind you, you don't really belong anywhere. You're just taking up space." Despite the little winge of self-pity, his final comment to the townspeople is what many of us hope to be able to say: "They were not wasted years."

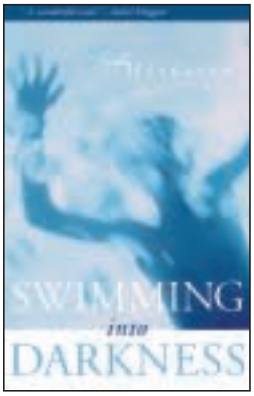
Vincent Hanlon
Vincent Hanlon is an emergency physician. He recently worked as a solo practitioner for a long weekend in Oyen, Alta.

Restoration projects

Swimming into darkness
Gail Helgason
Regina (SK): Coteau Books; 2002
284 pp $18.95 ISBN 1-55050-186-0

The enactment of the Saskachewan Medical Care Insurance Act has already resulted in serious impairment of medical care in your province. In our opinion the implementation of this Act will accelerate this deterioration to disastrous proportions. — Message to Premier Lloyd from the CMA, June 1962

It is high summer, 1962, in rural Saskatchewan. Thora Sigurdson, age 13, is beginning to worry about how she looks in a bathing suit. The province's doctors, one of whom is the father of Thora's best friend, are on strike, protesting the imposition of medicare. It is a summer Thora would rather forget, but from the vantage point of 1998 she remembers every detail of it with a clarity that is sometimes improbable. But the narrator of Gail Helgason's first novel is an historian, and not only of herself: she is reconstructing the homestead, and the life, of a (fictional) Icelandic-Canadian poet, Markus Olafsson, on the banks of the North Saskatchewan.



It has become fairly standard in contemporary Canadian fiction to simultaneously resurrect and invent the past. It is as if, in our collective consciousness, we seek reassurance that there are many layers to our history, and that those layers are rich and resonant. Certainly they are, but this novel takes us to digsites that are a little overworked with the narrator's prescience and with self-fulfilling metaphors. Immigrant history, the birth-pangs of medicare, family relationships, betrayal, death and coming of age: these themes are laid down carefully, one upon the other, with a lyricism that is highly self-aware. The result is a narrative one might describe as sedimentary, not metamorphic.

One of the richest strata of the book is Helgason's portrayal of the tensions and mutual dependencies that can bind a community together or tear it apart. Dr. Robert "Mac" McConnell is technically on strike, but he still hoists a flag at his summer cabin to let his patients know where to find him. What is it that turns the tide of local opinion against his family? His strike action, yes, but also a resentment arising from vaguer things — his wife's taste for Montreal fashions, perhaps, or his daughter's eccentric egg-headedness. Social cohesion — one of the promises of publicly funded health care — is fragile in this little community, where the doctor who built safe diving rafts at the public beach and helped to reconstruct the curling rink and steered Thora's family away from emotional and financial ruin is still viewed as untrustworthy, somehow. The community's ambivalent relationship with its only doctor expresses society's often resentful relationship with its professional elites. One of Thora's friends comments that the doctors are between a rock and a hard place: their own association is forcing them to break the Hippocratic Oath. Another speaker is less sympathetic: "That rock being Arizona. The hard place likely being Hawaii."

In the tension that builds, catastrophically, with each day of the strike, it becomes difficult to discern the boundary between political and personal allegiance. "It's our duty to stand up for what we think," Thora's father says. "We damned well don't want socialized medicine in this province." Her mother adds, "Besides, Mac is our friend."

Betrayal is always personal, Thora learns, and it is her difficulty in confronting her own disloyalty that provides the psychological impetus for the story. The dark lake of that long-ago summer is supplanted by the river of her adult life — a river calm on the surface, as she describes it, but whose current runs swiftly underneath. As that current rises, threatening to destroy her restoration project, she asks herself what she longs to know about Markus Olafsson, upon whom tragedy once descended in a lightning bolt no more anticipated, perhaps, than the events of 1962. For both the archeologist as for the poet, overcoming grief requires confronting an *afturgöngur*, a departed one who must be persuaded, by the resiliance of the living, to rest.

Anne Marie Todkill
CMAJ