

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."

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Restoration projects

Swimming into darkness

Gail Helgason

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The enactment of the Saskatchewan 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 dig

sites 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 resilience of the living, to rest.

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