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The Dove in Bathurst Station by Patricia Westerhof

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Encountering Toronto's Other Side

The Dove in Bathurst Station by PATRICIA WESTERHOF

Brindle & Glass, 2013 \$19.95

Reviewed by MATTHEW ZANTINGH

Patricia Westerhof's *The Dove in Bathurst Station* is a very good debut novel. I need to confess that my view on this is biased by two factors: one, Westerhof and I are a part of the Dutch immigrant community that left the Netherlands to come to Canada after World War II, albeit she is a second-generation Dutch Canadian, whereas I am third-generation. Second, this novel is deeply rooted in downtown Toronto, and I have always been fascinated by the city and its past. That being said, I believe that this novel offers plenty for readers that don't share either of these connections.

The novel centres on Marta Elzinga, a high school guidance counsellor at Dufferin Tech, as she struggles to come to grips with her seemingly stalled life. She feels inadequate at her job dealing with immigrant and impoverished children whose future prospects are always entangled by class, race, and gender. Her marriage is faltering as Matt, her record-producing husband, has become distant and more interested in the young female songwriters he works with. Complicating all of this is Marta's past history in Lethbridge, Alberta, where her high school ex-boyfriend committed suicide soon after she moved to Toronto over 10 years ago. *The Dove in Bathurst Station* records Marta's slow journey out of this knotted emotional context and through a deeply painful healing process.

This process is jump-started by a chance encounter with a previous student who is now an urban explorer. Westerhof's

novel really takes off when Marta begins to explore the sewers and storm drains that lie beneath the Toronto's streets. Although this is a clandestine world for her, she is enthralled by the vast architecture that is invisible to most Torontonians and finds a deep sense of peace in the wet but quiet confines of concrete and brick. Urban exploring has become quite popular in many cities as people seek out the hidden or abandoned spaces that lie within a city's vast fabric. In Toronto a group of explorers including Ninjalicious started up an influential zine called *Infiltration: the zine about going places you're not supposed to go* in 1996. Westerhof acknowledges this journal as a source for her writing, but her novel makes this underground subculture available to a much wider reading audience. Abandoned subway tunnels, storm drains, and Prohibition-era secret tunnels all feature in the novel and bring an element of mysterious allure to the city. I think that Westerhof's novel does good work in re-writing Toronto's narrative as one of mystery and wonder rather than one of a concrete jungle or an oversaturated consumer landscape. This is a Toronto that is very different from the one portrayed in popular media. Cities are wonderful spaces, but it often takes getting out of the car and on foot to discover this reality. Westerhof puts it well when she writes: "People, she thought, were like cities—you got to know the main thoroughfares, but there was a world of mystery beneath that remained off-limits, tenebrous."

The novel also features southern Alberta's prairie landscapes, as Marta spent a number of years in Lethbridge before her father moved their family to Toronto. Having lived on the Prairies myself, I can relate to Westerhof's thick descriptions of the vastness of the landscape, but also the

richness of its fields and long-grass prairie. For instance, she writes “The Alberta sky vaulted above her, an enormous dome. The sun had melted into marbleized swirls and bands just above the prairie, casting enough light that the crops in the fields she passed were still easy to recognize: sugar beets, alfalfa, flax, canola.” At the same time, Westerhof draws an interesting connection between Lethbridge’s rural landscape and Toronto’s urban one: “as kids, how they had loved poking around in abandoned and secluded places—deserted barns, the vacant lot near their house back in Lethbridge, the Oldman River culvert under the railroad tracks.” Marta finds similar neglected spaces in Toronto as she visits the King Edward Hotel in Toronto: “leaning forward on the balcony rail, she surveyed the combination of magnificence and decay before her: the holes in the ceiling, the ruined surfaces, the exquisite trim.” These thick descriptions jumped out at me as some of the most important work in the novel. They help to enrich the novel’s setting but also feature some of Westerhof’s most poetic and memorable pieces of writing.

One of the key themes of the novel is whether one’s life is guided by some higher power or whether it simply unfolds by chance and accident. Early on Marta thinks: “most major changes in life happened randomly.” However, the novel is bookended by a frame narrative in which Jacob Elzinga, Marta’s father, must decide whether to continue his work as a minister at a Dutch church in Lethbridge or become a chaplain in Toronto. He leaves the decision up to God as he randomly chooses between sending the acceptance or declining letter. Yet the novel itself wrestles with the question of whether the course of a human life is within our control or subject

to all sorts of influences and factors. While *The Dove in Bathurst Station* is clearly set in a Christian context, it is neither preachy nor naively optimistic. Instead, Marta’s soul-searching comes across as genuine and meaningful. From an ecocritical perspective, the fact that this soul-searching is so intimately intertwined with landscape is telling. Scholars interested in the connections between spirituality and place will find plenty to work with here.

Also of interest to ecocritics will be Marta’s relationship to Toronto’s urban animals. In the first chapter, a mink on Toronto Island appears to her as an enigmatic sign that spurs her to watch for any kind of other urban animals. She finds the eponymous dove, a heron, a raccoon, and a crow all in the confines of the city. All of these experiences are meaningful for her, yet she is unsure what kind of sign they might portend, if any. While some might read these animals as shallow symbols of divine intervention, Westerhof leaves any kind of meaning ambiguous, making the animals important characters in the novel’s narrative arc. Her novel also helps readers remember that cities, particularly Toronto, are home to many more-than-human animals.

Overall, I believe that *The Dove in Bathurst Station* is an important book in Toronto’s voluminous archive of literature. It explores spirituality, the urban landscape, and the human ability to help others in a thoroughly satisfying manner. While the ending seemed a bit too tidy for my own liking, this does not hurt the overall achievement of the novel.

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urban nature in Windsor, Hamilton, and Toronto, Ontario, earlier this year before moving back to the Prairies.