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Hillsdale Book by Gerald Hill

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“You are entering Hillsdale”

Hillsdale Book by GERALD HILL

NeWest Press, 2015 \$19.95

Reviewed by MATTHEW ZANTINGH

Gerald Hill's *Hillsdale Book* is the latest entry in a growing body of deep explorations of place in Canadian poetry. While reading Hill's playful paean to a Regina suburb he is continually drawn back to, I could not help but think of similar projects like Robert Kroetsch's *Ledger*, George Bowering's *Kerrisdale Elegies*, Daphne Marlatt's *Steveston*, Dennis Lee's *Civil Elegies*, bpNichol's *The Martyology*, Tim Lilburn's *Moosewood Sandhills*, Aritha van Herk's *Places Far From Ellesmere*, Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill*, or Lisa Robertson's *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office of Soft Architecture*. No doubt I have missed some texts here, but I hope my point is clear: Canadian poets are deeply intrigued by place.

Hillsdale, for those that do not know, is “a southern suburb of Regina. Opened to its first few houses in 1956, Hillsdale was a modern suburb, in the mid-’50s sense of modern urban design . . . by 2008 Hillsdale becomes a textual field on which a boy (1961-1972), and a man (1995-2010) and a traveler (as ever) arrive and leave, return and leave, figuring who and where they are” (ix). While this might seem like uninspiring terrain for poetry, Hill proves this is not the case as *Hillsdale Book* is a lively and complex work. Utilizing a mixture of lyric poems, found poetry, photographs, epigraphs, and maps of Hillsdale, Hill illuminates a rich history of people in a specific place. Following Robert Kroetsch, he digs into the area's geologic history in short poems like the following:

“five hundred meters of late Mesozoic / earth that floor / so polyurethane my bedroom let's / follow it down get stuck in a word / *gumbo*” (1-5). Here we find the glacial and Precambrian meeting a suburban child's bedroom in a rich collision of sound and meaning. The connections to Kroetsch are later made explicit in the chapter “Kroetsch Park: A Subdivision,” and in the poem “*Paterson* in Kroetsch Park” where the speaker recalls asking the elder poet about “the subject of / the docu-autogeography” (5-6). Hill does not just stay in geological stratum but spends a significant portion of the book digging into his childhood and his parents' history in the place. In poems like “A Boy's Room 1962” and “What Sisters Have to Say,” readers gain a strong sense of childhood in a Regina suburb in the 1960s. Later, Hill explores his return to the suburb as an adult and it is these rich interconnections between people, place, and events that make the collection come alive.

Perhaps I have been a bit too ecstatic in my praise of this book. I moved to Moose Jaw two years ago to take up a teaching position, so southern Saskatchewan is unknown territory for me. Thus, Hill's book feels like a starting point for my own journey of literary mapping. However, I do think that there is much merit in the collection as Hill demonstrates a willingness to use form and line to fit the winding, labyrinthine corridors of Hillsdale itself. Having taken the opportunity to bicycle through some of the streets that Hill explores, I can attest to its strange logic of “protecting two sensibilities, the car and the family, [with] the design featur[ing] perimeter through-streets and a snarl of interior bays, crescents, and cul-de-sacs” (ix).

Allow me to share some highlights from the collection: a list of streets in Hillsdale named after certain men from the area along with a description of their job or role. This poetic catalogue outlines a network of Saskatchewan's various historic public figures while also imprinting them on the physical streets of Hillsdale; a poem called "Imagine a Story" where a young boy is intrigued by his father's discovery of a gun buried in the ground; a chapter of detailed recollections from a neighbor named Flo that ends with a wry exclamation of "I don't think I've told you very much" (56); and a concrete poem called "Tree-piece Suite" illustrating the changing form of the streets of Hillsdale.

Hillsdale Book is also a beautiful object in its own right with NeWest Press, with a cover that features a map of Hillsdale's streets along with markers for various important locations for Hill including the place "where Lorne planted the earthworms" and "kids we hated lived somewhere in here." Here, the book evokes the way each of us maintains a mental map

of a place that is overlaid with experiences and small bits of seemingly useless knowledge, building on the textual work Hill does within the covers.

Hillsdale Book will be of interest to ecocritics who work on place, the intersections of natural and social history, contemporary poetry and, particularly, documentary poems. While the book is absolutely rooted in a small local place, it is part of a long tradition of exploring small places in Canadian literature.

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