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Big-hearted novel an ‘extraordinarily rich book’

Author’s tale conjures aboriginal landscapes of Haida Gwaii, pays tribute to a late UBC professor

BY JOHN F. HULCOOP, SPECIAL TO THE SUN MAY 11, 2012

Leslie Hall Pinder’s third novel, *Bring Me One of Everything*, is big: big-hearted in its loving depiction of character; socially important in its moral take on the treatment of the Haida Nation; ambitious in its scope, gathering together ethnography, anthropology, history, art, music and personal relationships into the paradox of transformation.

As Brett Morris, a composer, observes early in the novel, “Transformation was the key, right? — of wood into totems, of animals into gods.” And, we might add, of fact into fiction, of betrayal into trust, of mother into child and child into mother, of life into death and back into life.

Having been asked by Morris to write the libretto for an opera based on the story of Austin Hart, a distinguished anthropologist who committed suicide, Alix Purcell, the novel’s narrator and central character, researches his life by interviewing his sister and daughter, his lover, his close friends, by seeking guidance from a first nations chief, and taking relevant facts in his journals and other documents in the university archives. Alix hopes “to use art to resurrect a deadman.” And this is exactly what Leslie Pinder is doing in her novel.

Donning the mask of fiction, she dances the spirit of Wilson Duff, the UBC anthropology professor who committed suicide in 1976, into the figure of Austin Hart. This is not, however, a roman à clef or a docudrama in prose. The transformation of fact into fiction is consummately affected.

Like all great magicians in literature, Pinder conjures up a colourful multi-dimensional world of her own inhabited by characters who live their lives quite independently of their factual forebears.

The book begins with the felling of a tree, the making, raising and felling of a totem pole, one of a large stand of poles Austin Hart takes from the Haida in order to salvage them.

Readers should not be misled or put off by the poetic prose of the first chapter; it settles into something more demotic from the second chapter onward. Pinder's fiercely tensile style is, however, full of striking figures of speech used brilliantly to transform a great range of emotions and ideas into words.

The taking of the totem poles — which Alix calls a “desecration” — is a nodal event since Hart himself anguishes over what he has done. Can desecration be redeemed by the reconsecration of the poles in the Museum of Anthropology, a cultural treasure preserved for all ages? Is Hart's guilt-racked conscience what drives him to suicide?

These are questions Alix must answer as she tries to transform her research into an opera-libretto. Her relationships with Hart's family and friends form a substantial part of the novel. But equally important is Alix's relationship with her ostensibly non-nurturing mother whose untimely telephone call interrupts and derails the suicide plan of her teenage daughter. Delicately, in different ways, Pinder implies parallels between Alix and Hart (his middle name is Alexander, for example). Together, they appear to become complementary incarnations of the famous twin stone masks (one blind, one sighted) reunited for the first time by Wilson Duff in his legendary exhibition *Images: Stone: BC* (Thirty Centuries of Northwest Coast Indian Sculpture, 1975).

But this is to simplify matters. Pinder's novel is a great deal more complicated.

Alix is also questing to find a family, not only a mother whose love will substantiate her legitimacy as a human being, but also a legitimate father. The temptation is to project surrogate paternity on Austin Hart. Not a good choice, since he abandoned his family by committing suicide without leaving a note to explain or to express his love.

Driven by her own urgent needs, Alix even assumes Hart's role by forging suicide notes to his family, a forgery quickly exposed by Hart's former lover, Claire, a clear-sighted woman who reveals truths about Hart no one else could possibly know. “Austin has become your totem,” she tells Alix, “now you must let him go.” What remains is for Alix to learn the lessons of life and death, the wisdom offered by Sophia, Alix's aptly named mother.

Sophia's slow progress from powerful parent into the uncertainties of senile dementia and finally into the brutal certainty of death and a childlike dependence on her daughter is observed with impeccable accuracy in language that captures all the pain of loss and the joy of reconciliation.

After the long historical perspectives, the beautiful aboriginal landscapes of Haida Gwaii, the ethnic and ethical arguments, the abstract problem of words in relation to music in opera, we are left with the deeply moving and originating relationship of mother and child.

This is an extraordinarily rich book and one that, quite honestly, I could not put down until I had read the last page.

John F. Hulcoop is a professor emeritus at the University of British Columbia, a poet and a literary critic.

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