



LITERARY REVIEW OF CANADA



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JENNIFER WELSH

The end of war?

*With military clashes in steady decline,
we're left facing a new kind of challenge*

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CBC payback

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accountable



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Erratum

On page 16 of "Fossil Policies" by George Anderson, it should have read "Dodge projects fiscal capacities for Alberta, Newfoundland and Saskatchewan that are substantially higher by 2020 than those of other provinces—ranging from 80 percent for Alberta to 35 percent for Saskatchewan." We apologize for any confusion.

Cover art and pictures throughout the issue by **Oleg Portnoy**.

Oleg Portnoy is an award-winning illustrator and graphic designer from Toronto. His illustration work has received recognition from American Illustration, Society of Illustrators West, 3X3 Illustration, CMYK Magazine and Creative Quarterly.

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Literary Review of Canada
170 Bloor St West, Suite 710
Toronto ON M5S 1T9
email: info@reviewcanada.ca
reviewcanada.ca
T: 416-531-1483 • F: 416-531-1612
Charitable number: 848431490RR0001.
To donate, visit reviewcanada.ca/support

EDITOR

Bronwyn Drainie
editor@reviewcanada.ca

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Mark Lovewell
Molly Peacock
Anthony Westell

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Robin Roger

POETRY EDITOR

Moir MacDougall

COPY EDITOR

Madeline Koch

ONLINE EDITORS

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Samantha Rudick, Robert Simone,
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RESEARCH

Rob Tilley

PUBLICITY AND MARKETING COORDINATOR

Olena Sullivan
publicity@reviewcanada.ca

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Nicole Dufoe

DESIGN

James Harbeck

ADVERTISING/SALES

Michael Wile
ads@lrcreview.com

PUBLISHERS

Alastair Cheng
a.cheng@reviewcanada.ca
Helen Walsh
h.walsh@reviewcanada.ca

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“Dear Sir or Madam...”

A Faulknerian take on oil, revenge and email scams, from Calgary to Lagos.

DAVID PENHALE

419

Will Ferguson

Viking Canada

399 pages, hardcover

ISBN 9780670064717

WILL FERGUSON'S THIRD NOVEL, *419*, opens with a bang. In Calgary, a car hurtles over an embankment and crashes, killing its sole occupant. The accident puzzles the investigating officer. The action shifts to Lagos, Nigeria, where a police inspector is trying to make sense of Laura, a tense young woman who has just flown in from Canada. She claims to be a tourist.

Why hasn't she brought a camera? The inspector gives Laura an oblique warning. "Visitors so often worry about lions, but it's the hyenas of this world one needs to watch for." We next meet a boy fishing with his father, the first of the novel's many sages and seers. "We live in a wet net," the fisherman tells his son. "We are caught in it as surely as the catfish and prawns." The dead man in the flattened car is Laura's father, Henry Curtis, a retired teacher who has spent long, solitary hours surfing the internet. The death is ruled a suicide. The family's bank accounts are empty.

To online predators, Henry's posts on wood-working sites amount to blood in the water. One day an email message arrives. "Miss Sandra, daughter of Dr. Atta, late Director & Chairman of the Contract Award Committee for the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation" needs Henry's help to get her tens of millions of U.S. dollars out of Nigeria. Puzzled, Henry replies, "I think you have me confused with someone else." In an internet café in Lagos, Winston, a likeable young man on the make, smiles in triumph. He plays Henry like a fish; to protect Miss Sandra's millions, there are fees to pay. In a 419 scheme—the number refers to a section of the Nigerian criminal code—the fees are the scam.

Just as we are settling in for a detective yarn, a troubled, hungry, friendless young woman walks into the story from the Sahel, and we begin to understand that *419* is a novel composed of journeys. Amina carries herself with pathetic dignity; the language of the novel enlarges to accommodate her. She is "layered in dust-muted indigos"; "she wore her beauty like a map"; "she had outwalked her own dialect, was deep among strangers now."

David Penhale is the author of *Passing Through (Cormorant, 2011)*, *a novel reviewed in the January/February 2012 LRC. He lives in Toronto and is working on his second novel.*

The novel's Faulknerian design—the narration switches between past, present and future—generates a centripetal force that pulls in naifs and tricksters, lovers and criminals, and many who, like Amina, are simply trying to survive. Among the dangers Amina and her fellow travellers face are roadblocks manned by heavily armed soldiers or corrupt policemen or, worst of all, freelance gangs ominously dubbed "Kill and Go."

Ferguson has made a reputation as a travel writer and, as we might expect, the novel's settings

Bucking the hothouse trend in Canadian fiction, *419* combines a clever plot with an exploration of larger concerns.

are attentively observed. Canadian locales are painted in pale tones. "Laura's windows ... looked onto that sandstone-and-steel city below with its Etch-a-Sketch skyline, a city that was constantly erasing and rewriting itself. A cold city, exhaling steam." Nigeria is brightly rendered. Lagos is "a city of millions, built on a swamp, on a series of stepping stones, on islands thick with humidity." Mbiama, an inland town, is "painted with lights, strings of coloured bulbs that were draped from tavern to brothel." Details seen in passing—a stone lion in Canada, a decaying cemetery in Nigeria—remind us that both countries figured on the imperial map, two of those red areas where, according to Marlow, the garrulous narrator of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—good things were being done. If, as Canadians, we took that smug assurance at face value, we were brought up short in 1975 by Chinua Achebe's scathing reassessment of *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe, a Nigerian and the author of *Things Fall Apart*, a milestone in African literature, saw Conrad's tale as racist and patronizing. A sentimental memory of the imperial past may linger on for some Canadians—consider the Harper government's recent proposal to restore the adjective "royal" to our navy—but for the Nigerian characters of *419*, colonialism carries a lasting sting.

Canada and Nigeria share more than heritage. Both are blessed—or cursed—with oil. Laura and her family seldom give the petroleum industry a thought. Calgary is "a city of CEOs and venture capital, of oil company offices hidden behind curtains of glass." In Nigeria, the impact is inescapable. "You could see gas flares above the jungle far into the distance, thin towers plumed with fire, the flames uncurling, illuminating the underside of clouds ... when the winds shifted, the air tasted like tin."

Bucking the hothouse trend in Canadian fiction, *419* combines a clever plot with an exploration of larger concerns. Nnamdi, the open-hearted boy we met

fishing with his father, visits the abandoned graves of British colonists, a corner of a foreign field that is forever England, or so Rupert Brooke wanted to believe. Nnamdi sees it differently. "An awful insult to the English *duwoi-you* who were left behind, the boy thought. Without proper rites performed in your own village, how could you ever find rest? You would be afflicted forever with wayward longings." Laura's father is no churchgoer. Yet he fears Judgement Day, when he might be called to account for his lapses of caring. In the spoiled paradise of the Niger Delta, fishermen cast their nets, evoking the gods—and hedging their bets. "Fewer than ever, but enough still, Wonyinghi willing!," quickly amended to "Christ willing!" The prayers may be broadcast to catch the ear of any god—early Celtic crosses combine the Christian

symbol with the sign of Wotan, after all—but in the postmodern cosmos, Mammon answers. "The miracle of the fish and the loaves played out in more paltry terms that day: hundreds of croaker fish had arrived belly-up from the oil creeks farther inland, sheathed in crude and already rotting."

Moral complexities abound. In a harrowing scene, we witness the conscription of a young 419er, a rising star among the "yahoo boys," by an underworld boss: a bigger fish swallowing a smaller. Addressing the young man as Adam, the first tenant of Eden, the crime boss glibly justifies his own criminal career as payback for colonialism: "*The sins of the fathers shall be visited upon their children*. And not just the children, but the children's children as well. Read the Bible, it's all in there. Make no mistake, Adam, we are in the business of retribution. We are in the business of revenge." But the adamic con artist knows better. In terrified silence he reflects that 419ers scam not only foreigners but also other Nigerians—even each other. As the story nears its haunting climax, Nnamdi, driven from his native village, clings to a nurturing, if disintegrating, animism. There are spirits in the trees, gods in the river. But the trees have been clear-cut and the river is dark with oil. When he encounters a gang of boys "grown wan and thin" who are stealing natural gas from a pipeline, Nnamdi, burdened with an altruism that will seal his fate, cannot look away. He warns the boys that the gas will poison them. "It was our bad fortune, wasn't it, Nnamdi?" they reply. "To sit on top of wealth that others wanted. Why do you think the gods punished us like that? Cursed us with oil. Why?" Nnamdi doesn't know.

The blurbs on the back cover promise the reader a page turner, and Ferguson delivers. However, when literary prizes are considered it would be a shame to see the novel lumped in with the police procedurals. *419* is an ambitious and well-realized literary novel, a thriller with a conscience and a heart. LRC