

## **Shifting Ground: Changing Communities in the Story Cycles *The Hunting Ground* and *Aurora Montrealis***

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Short stories are windows looking out on particular moments in time. In contrast to the expansive vista provided by a novel, the short story focuses on a particular aspect of the wider view.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the short story cycle, wherein a group of tales centres on a single place or person. That place or person acts as the core of the larger work, while each story offers an observation point from which the totality of the whole is gradually revealed. Such is the case with the two collections of short stories examined in this paper. Both deal with the particularity of place in Quebec. Lise Tremblay's *The Hunting Ground* is set in a small village economically dependent upon an adjacent hunting camp, while Monique Proulx's *Aurora Montrealis* chronicles the many ways in which Montreal influences, and is influenced by, the diverse peoples that constitute the city. Both books employ the form of the story cycle to illuminate the multiple perspectives from which their subjects may be understood.

### **Short Stories and the Story Cycle**

The short story is a relative newcomer in the history of literature. The first well-known advocate of the form was Edgar Allan Poe in the nineteenth century. Poe defined the short story as a "short prose tale . . . identified [by its] style; brevity; [and] status" that "could be read in one sitting" (Lohafer ix). The overall form incorporates "the techniques of impressionism," primarily "subjective points of view, pervasive imagery, controlled tone, [and] ellipsis" (ix). *The Hunting Ground* and *Aurora Montrealis* fit this description; they deal with "persons marginalized by region, gender, [or] politics" (x). The short story holds the power to break through the pervasive

“literary hegemony” to address issues of “cultural diversity and social concern” (xii), as will be seen in the works of Tremblay and Proulx.

The short story cycle intensifies the possibilities inherent in the general format of the genre. Canadian writers, in particular, have embraced the short story cycle for well over a century, as Gerald Lynch demonstrates in his essay “The One and the Many: Canadian Short Story Cycles.” According to Lynch, “The story cycle continues to be well suited to the concerns of Canadian writers intent on portraying a particular region or community, its history, its characters, its communal concerns” (Lynch 36). The format of the story cycle allows the author to examine in depth

. . . the struggles of small communities for coherence and survival under contrary pressures from metropolitanism and modernity . . . in a form that mirrors the struggle between cohesion and a kind of entropy, or between solidarity and fragmentation, between things holding together and things pulling apart. (37)

While Quebecois writers are notably absent from Lynch’s otherwise illuminating historical and contemporary examination of Canadian authors of short story cycles, his description nonetheless applies to both of the story collections under consideration here. Even the wider range of *Aurora Montrealis*—the consideration of a metropolis rather than a village—focuses on the essential concern of a community within the larger whole (in this case, the Francophone fear of loss of identity in the face of English and immigrant encroachment). Thus, *Aurora Montrealis* provides a lens as tightly focused on a particularity of its sprawling subject as *The Hunting Ground* offers for perusal of a small geographical area.

Lynch supplies one further definition of the short story cycle, quoting Forrest L. Ingram: “[I]t is ‘a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader’s successive

experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts” (Ingram, qtd. in Lynch 37). This definition holds true for Tremblay’s and Proulx’s books. Their cycles provide a kind of “unity in disunity” (Lynch 37), connecting the stories with an overarching theme of communal identity. Furthermore, the characters in both authors’ stories struggle to define their individual identities within the larger framework of their community’s quest for identity. The stories are fraught with tension, engaged in battles between past and future, in which individuals are often left wandering through a maze of shifting possibilities. The characters frequently feel that they must make a stand on ground that is constantly changing beneath their feet, as the security of the traditional community dissolves and reforms around them.

### **Tremors in the Village: *The Hunting Ground***

Tremblay’s *The Hunting Ground* takes place around the turn of the twenty-first century, when important social and economic changes are affecting the unnamed Quebec village that is the locus of the stories. Each story takes place from the point of view of a different character—also unnamed—who resides in the village either as a permanent resident or a seasonal visitor. The two types of inhabitants offer differing, and often conflicting, views of the same locale and people. Together, they reveal a microcosm of tradition under assault by alterations in attitudes toward social arrangements, particular those involving the roles of women. The latent influences of feminism, long felt in other parts of Canada, are rising in many of the village’s women. Four wives leave their husbands over the course of the story cycle in a quest to establish their individual identities; another wife fervently wishes she could leave, and yet another wife dies—“poisoned,” her husband believes, by the village (Tremblay 88). Nonresident visitors bring with them more expansive outlooks on woman’s place in family and community, dispersing their

opinions among a restive audience of village women—not exactly sowing the seeds of discontent, but rather encouraging them to grow.

While the changes in women's lives are the thread that ties the stories together, they are but one aspect of the overall theme of the village's struggle for cohesion. Tremblay sets up the predicament faced by the remaining residents in the first story: the village is isolated; its children must attend school a hundred kilometres away; young people consider their hometown "the most boring place on earth" (12). Tourism is the only economic foundation left in the community, centred around the hunting camp and its seasonal activity, and a few regular visitors who maintain vacation homes. Without the money it brings to the surviving businesses, the town would wither away. But the economic benefits of tourism come at a price. The visitors, mostly city folk from Montreal or other urban centres, import not only their cash, but their ideas as well. They are less supportive of traditional family roles; they view the rural environment differently than those who live there year-round; they disapprove of the unwritten rule that everyone has the right to know everyone else's business. The visitors bring with them the inescapable knowledge that the world is changing, and the village must either adapt or die. The final story in the cycle makes evident that change will win out. In the battle "between things holding together and things pulling apart" (37), entropy will be the victor. The village as it has always been will be preserved only in a book of old photos and text produced, ironically, by a visitor who decides to become permanently rooted in the community. His decision to stay offers the hope that new residents will bring a fresh outlook to the moribund psyche of the village, allowing it to remodel itself and survive in the modern world.

**Earthquake in the City: *Aurora Montrealis***

The search for identity in a changing environment is more complicated in Proulx's story cycle, *Aurora Montrealis*. The palette on which the stories are painted is broader and less concentrated than that of *The Hunting Ground*. Montreal is a large city, and its traditions reflect the influence of many cultures. The Quebecois culture is under primary consideration in Proulx's stories, struggling to maintain its unique identity against the incursion of outside forces. The battle is for more than primacy of either Francophone or Anglophone influence: immigrants from around the world are settling in Quebec in large numbers, bringing with them not only their own languages and customs, but their differing views of society as well. In addition, Aboriginal residents feel the resentment of the dislocated and discounted, relegated to a status outside the mainstream. Proulx's stories form a kaleidoscope view of disparate identities attempting to define themselves against a backdrop of competing cultural interests. The tremors caused by their individual struggles are felt on a widespread basis across Montreal. Although the unifying theme is the battle for Quebec's independence, the myriad concerns of multiple cultures and burgeoning modernity echo the struggles of Tremblay's villagers on a grander scale.

Proulx explores many layers of society—ethnic, linguistic, political, economic, familial, psychological. Her Montreal is populated by Latino, Chinese, Italian, Haitian, Japanese, Greek, Middle Eastern, Portuguese, Aboriginal, and of course, French and English Canadians—a human mosaic that can be viewed as either a discordant jumble or a beautiful work of art. Her protagonists are middle class, working class, wealthy, homeless, self-aware, self-deluded—all pilgrims searching for the elusive shrine of Identity. Their searches may turn around a positive fulcrum (the desire for an independent Quebec) or one that is negative (rejection of the incomprehensible Other). How they define themselves depends on what they bring with them,

what they are willing to give up, and what they are willing to learn. They have in common a need to find a comfortable, or at least tolerable, place in a city spiked with invisible tensions.

The title story of the collection is about a teenage boy's struggle to overcome his isolation and his prejudices while en route to finding his place in the new Montreal. Laurel's fear of the Other—personified by a group of immigrant boys that he perceives as a threat to his physical safety and the cultural integrity of his neighbourhood—forms the nucleus of the story. Himself a new resident of the neighbourhood, Laurel feels compelled to expose the city's weaknesses—"the real and desolate face of the new Montreal," as he perceives it (Proulx 146). He is contemptuous of his parents' refusal to take a stand against the shifting makeup of the city, and of their ability to not only tolerate but thrive among the mixture of cultures. He has no illusions that the residents of the city will ever be an homogenous group. But he believes that overall standards have been lowered, concurrent with the arrival of so many diverse peoples, and determines that his mission in life will be "to defend French Montreal against the Invaders" (149). His psychic alienation is manifested in his habit of wandering alone through the city-enclosed woodland of Mont Royal, scribbling an angry diatribe against the newcomers who "take everything" (155) and alter the city's character. He discounts the contributions the immigrants make to their new home; he is willing to enjoy Japanese sushi and Syrian pastries, but he is not willing to incorporate their makers into his vision of what the city should be. His resistance against change is absolute—until he has an unexpected epiphany at the story's end. He is dumbfounded when the Greek boy he considers his mortal enemy finally speaks to him; instead of the expected threat, the boy says "Welcome to Montreal" (157). Suddenly, Laurel perceives that *he* is the newcomer, the foreigner in the neighbourhood—and is nonetheless welcomed by the established residents. His "abyss of uncertainty and ignorance" exposed, he

admits that he “knows nothing, must start again from scratch” (158). He must recast himself as merely the latest piece added to Montreal’s mosaic, rather than the arbiter of its design.

Laurel’s story is the heart of *Aurora Montrealis*, illuminating one of the most pressing issues faced in a changing city. Besides the question of Francophone Quebecois culture, Proulx also addresses poverty (in stories of working class struggles, a street performer, and a homeless man); class (a working man who cannot cash a cheque in a bank that caters to a wealthy clientele); marital infidelity (couples who contemplate or engage in adultery); sexual abuse (a twelve-year-old girl who prostitutes herself in order to earn the money to buy a herself a stuffed animal); false conceptions of the homeland (an author who finds French publishers uninterested in the work of Quebecois writers); consumerism (a Chinese immigrant’s shock when confronted with the overwhelming selection of goods in a Montreal store); the endangerment of ethnic identity (in several stories); and other issues.

The story cycle is refined and completed in the last entry, the tale of a Francophone woman acting as a palliative care companion to a dying Anglophone man. The woman is disoriented and off-balance; she has just returned to Montreal after a two-year absence and is discomfited by its changed character. The man, embittered and misanthropic, is looking back at life and forward toward death with a detachment that he can’t quite keep ironic. Together, they find unlikely consolation in their shared faults. At the end, as the man’s death approaches, the woman finds comfort in the thought that he is about to become “a white page on which nothing has been written” (228). Proulx offers these last words as a metaphor for the terrifying and comforting possibilities of Montreal’s effort to rewrite itself. Fittingly, the cycle ends with a new beginning.

## Conclusion

Like the members of any community faced with change, the characters of *The Hunting Ground* and *Aurora Montrealis* must find their footing on unstable ground. Their struggles “between solidarity and fragmentation” (Lynch 37) are well documented in these two short story cycles. They share common themes of identity and the tension between individual and community needs, while each story examines the theme from a different perspective. The focus of *The Hunting Ground* is, necessarily, more narrow than that of *Aurora Montrealis*; it has less territory to cover, and fewer constituents to consider. Yet, the concerns of Self versus Other, friend versus stranger, tradition versus reformation are crucial to both. Neither Tremblay nor Proulx attempts to offer solutions to the conundrums of societal change; there are no easy answers. Rather, both authors illustrate many possible paths toward the reconciliation of opposing forces. Just like the characters in the short story cycles, readers must learn to maintain their balance on the surface of a changing world.

## Works Cited

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