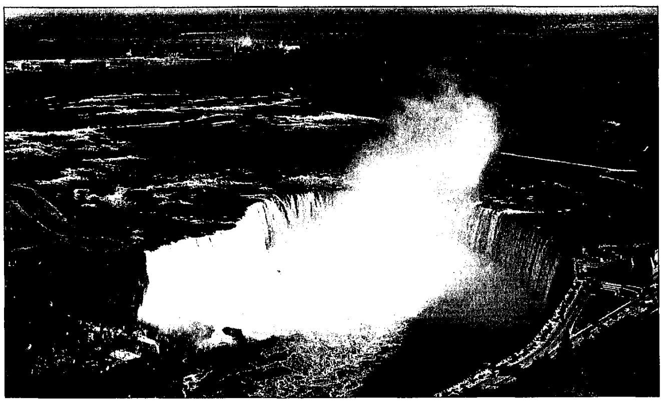


Niagara Falls: the spectacle has attracted daredevils, hucksters and entrepreneurs — and tourists.

The wonder of Niagara Falls

By Michael Finlayson
Special to the Free Press

Niagara: A History of the Falls: by Pierre Berton,
480 pp., Toronto, McClelland & Stewart.

In these visually bountiful times of color television, movies and Imax, it may be difficult to conceive of the force that the first sight and sound of Niagara Falls made upon the minds of those from an earlier era. After Charles Dickens spent ten days on that "enchanted ground" he wrote:

"It was not until I came on Table Rock, and looked — Great Heaven, on what a Fall of bright-green water! — that it came upon me in its full might and majesty. Then, when I felt how near to my creator I was standing, the first effect, and the enduring one — instant and lasting — of the tremendous spectacle, was Peace. Peace of Mind, tranquillity, calm recollections of the Dead, great thoughts of Eternal Rest and Happiness; nothing of gloom or terror. Niagara was at once stamped upon my heart, an Image of Beauty; to remain there, changeless and indelible, until its pulses cease to beat, for ever."

In his latest book, Pierre Berton creates a rich tableau of the Falls and their history. In the sea of facts he has collected and organized there is something for anyone with intellectual curiosity, whatever his taste. On the passage, history is invigorated; colorful personalities, some of heroic dimensions, are revivified; and the many victims of the Falls are mourned again.

He begins, as I suppose he must, with the geological facts: what caused the Falls and how they have altered over time. This naturally leads to a discussion of the impression they must have made on earlier peoples, before the great adjacent platform called Table Rock was demolished by the force of the water. From this — though it is difficult in short compass to capture the wealth of detail — flow three themes. First, is the tale of how the Falls have been depicted over the years, from the first sketch through the later creative but rudimentary attempts to represent their vastness and motion, to the great oil paintings of Frederic Edwin Church, whose artistic life story is briefly told.

Second, and dominant, is the manifold attraction of the Falls for entrepreneurs of every stripe. There were (and are) hucksters peddling everything from walks beside and behind the Falls to photos and souvenirs of them. Acrobats (such as "the Great Blondin") were inevitably drawn there. Some walked, ran and somersaulted over ropes strung across the foot of the Falls in feats of athletic prowess. Others, in pursuit of fame alone, went over the Falls in barrels.

The needs to cross the divide and harness the energy yielded men of true genius. Mr. Berton is fascinating here. The stories about the Hungarian scientist, Nikola Tesla, and the engineer, John Roebling, (who also designed the Brooklyn Bridge) make compelling reading. Tesla discovered and proved that through alternating current the Falls' power could be exploited. Roebling's bridge over the Niagara was the world's first railway suspension bridge and it was opened to the public in march of 1855. It survived intact until it was retired in 1897 for a larger structure.

The scientific means of utilizing the energy of the Falls attracted ambitious men of industry, such as Robert Moses, whose megalomania is chronicled. Mr. Berton reminds us of the revolutionary impact of hydro power, how important it was to the industrialization of North America and of the then more pressing debate over whether the control of it should be private or public.

The third subject is the environmental one. The availability of huge amounts of hydro power attracted industries which employed many (especially on the U.S. side of the Falls). Cities sprung up. Tons of waste were dumped into and near the Falls. Love Canal was one example of the consequences and the author refreshes our memories about that too.

These words only skim the surface of a broad-ranging and vivid work. For those who know Mr. Berton's other books, it may suffice to say that this one is not as good as his best (*The National Dream*), but it is easily at the top of the second rank, an enjoyable and easy read.

Michael Finlayson is a Winnipeg freelance writer.

Give this one a chance

By Scott Van Wynsberghe
Special to the Free Press

Sacred Hunger: by Barry Unsworth:
638 pp., Toronto, Penguin, $17.99.

"At twenty-one he was reticent, not given to gestures, moreover just then in a state of inflamed sensitivity, being in the early phase of his undeclared love for Sarah Wolpert." Not counting a brief prologue, that is the eleventh sentence of Sacred Hunger, the latest offering from veteran British novelist Barry Unsworth. Had it appeared just ten sentences earlier, Mr. Unsworth might have acquired the distinction of having devised one of the worst opening lines in a major work of contemporary friction. That the book remains a major work, despite such near and actual mishaps, well illustrates the unusual challenge it poses for the reader.

Even those unfamiliar with Mr. Unsworth's nine earlier novels may recall the splendid, little 1988 film Pascali's Island, based on the Unsworth volume of that name. So the author's name carries a certain weight, which is just as well, because Mr. Unsworth, although an accomplished writer for the most part, has inside him a rather bad writer who occasionally stages an escape.

Most of the worst lapses of *Sacred Hunger* occur in the first 50 or so pages — it appears the book had a difficult birth — and thus threaten to put off anyone approaching this fierce fulmination against the slave trade of the mid-1700s and the forces that motivated it. Take, for instance, the slaveship being built by the Liverpool merchant who is the father of Erasmus Kemp, the young fellow discussed in that regrettable eleventh sentence. A memorable description of such a foul vessel would be an easy thing for most scribblers, but Mr. Unsworth manages to over-write it here, under-write it there, and leave the whole passage syntactically convoluted. "All the same," he relates, "these Liverpool ships had some special features: they were built high in the stern so that the swivel guns mounted on their quarterdecks could be the more easily, the more commodiously as might have been said then — a word curiously typical of the age — trained down on their waists to quell slave revolt; they had a good width of beam and a good depth of hold and they were thickened at the rails to make death leaps more difficult."

Likewise, our first sight of Erasmus Kemp's sweetie, Sarah Wolpert, is awkward and even silly: "And then," we are informed, "she had a way of holding herself, an unusual habit of emphasis: as she drew to the climax of what she was saying, her voice would quicken, she would raise her head and lower her lashes, and a delicate shudder, slight but perceptible, would pass over her like a throb of delivery or release."

It is definitely a mistake, however, to let Mr. Unsworth's commodious slaveships and throbbing ladies to get in the way of what follows. Coming out of nowhere are taut, economical lines that go right to the bone. One of the ragged crewmen of the Kemp family's vessel emerges this way: "At forty-three, Hughes was a stranger on land. Brief, violent debauches on her dirty edges were all in twenty-five years he had known of her." There, now, that is how it is done.

The captain of the ship, Thurso, is another work of art, snapping at everyone who goes near him and listening to voices in his head. Once the expedition is under way, collecting its appalling cargo, he lectures the idealistic ship's surgeon, Matthew Paris: "Now as to the slave who refuses to eat food, he does it out of a perverse desire to frustrate us and make himself awkward. There is a wicked, contrary spirit in these people, Mr. Paris. I know 'em well. If they would make the best of their condition, a slaveship would ba a happy ship."

Paris, who is the cousin of the priggish Erasmus Kemp, finds himself being lectured by more than a few characters as he descends deeper into the inferno. At one outpost on the African coast, he finds a system whereby the local populace is terrorized into docility by first the issuance of generous credit and then threats of enslavement if payments are overdue. A wandering portraitist cynically sums it up for Paris: "Money is sacred, as everyone knows. So then must be the hunger for it and the means we use to obtain it. Once a man is in debt he becomes a flesh and blood form of money. You can do what you like to him, you can work him to death or you can sell him. This cannot be called cruelty or greed because we are seeking only to recover our investment and that is a sacred duty".

Sacred Hunger, then, evolves into an assault on capitalism, using the slave trade as its starting point. Mr. Unsworth at times betrays a near-obsession on the subject, glaring at the merest exchange of goods as if a satanic rite had been performed. Still, he is a shrewd judge of people. When Paris leads a mutiny and — with the vengeful Kemp in pursuit — tries to erect an anarchistic, multi-racial commune in the wilds of Florida, guess what happens. Commerce takes root, leading to the usual divisions of class. All that remains is the wistful dream that things might have gone another way.

In the end, *Sacred Hunger* has something to annoy everyone but also several things to please many of the annoyed parties. Those peevish over sloppy prose or dogmatism might want to avoid it, but they would then miss a sprawling, well-researched tale of humanity at its basest. From the humiliating, clinical examinations of slaves about to be sold to the petty viciousness inflicted on British sailors of the eighteenth century, the book is food for very dark thought. Businessmen pursue false gods, romantics embark on doomed quests, aristocrats drug themselves with self-indulgence, and proletarians merrily wallow in the gutter. There are no easy answers here, the pain simply shifts from one group to another, as the author underlines: "Nothing a man suffers will prevent him from inflicting suffering on others. Indeed, it will teach him the way".

Scott Van Wynsberghe is a Winnipeg freelance writer.

Mortimer knows his bad guys . . .

By Chris Smith
Staff Writer

The Oxford Book of Villains: edited by John Mortimer,
431 pp., Toronto, Oxford University Press, $33.95

Everyone loves a villain, and author John Mortimer has gathered together a motley crew for our reading pleasure. History and literature are full of candidates for such a compilation and as the dust jacket blurb contests, Mr. Mortimer, as an author and lawyer, is ideally suited to the task of choosing villains.

This book contains some of the best-known villains, with the Bible and Shakespeare posting more than a few entries. Passages from the Bible lead off several chapters of the book, including: Murderers, of course, with the story of Cain slaying Abel; Seducers and Cads stars the snake of the Garden of Eden for his role in getting Eve to eat the forbidden fruit; and Traitors and Spies with Judas Iscariot. It came a close second in the Hypocrites chapter, not to mention a liberal sprinkling in other chapters. That is not a bad showing for the "Good Book."

P.G. Wodehouse, in an excerpt from *Louder and Funnier*, offers an amusing theory: "Broadly speaking, the trouble with every villain of a thriller is that he suffers from a fatal excess of ingenuity." Wodehouse explains that an ordinary man, when he wants to murder someone, simply borrows a gun and does the deed when he is not busy at work. The villain, Wodehouse reasons, is incapable of simplicity and will always come up with a scheme involving a gun, a tripod, several strings, a weight and a candle and it will fail.

True life experiences can be just as ingenious as some of Wodehouse's villains. A 1978 newspaper story from Edinburgh details how a couple was waiting for a bus when a man demanded the woman's purse. The husband said it was in her shopping basket and when he bent down to get it, he detached her artificial leg and whacked the would-be robber with it. Said the husband: It was not my intention to do any more than frighten him off, but, unhappily for us all, he died."

In the Con Men chapter, another newspaper account has an escaper, a criminal psychopath from the Indiana state insane asylum, hiding out for two days before going through an interview for the job of senior medical officer at the state's largest prison. He got the job — one member of the panel said he gave a "brilliant interview" — and kept it until his photograph appeared in a local newspaper.

Satan, of course, plays a major role in a book about villains, but he has ample help (from real life and fiction) in the likes of Lady Macbeth, Dracula, LIzzie Borden and Hitler and Mussolini and Nero, Caligula and Lucrezia Borgia. The authors represented in the book include Chaucer, Albert Camus, Thomas Hardy, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Oscar Wilde, Dickens, Kipling, Dylan Thomas and Dostoievsky to name a few.

The term villain itself has broad meanings, from the British police using it to refer to anyone with a criminal record to the Oxford definition of a wicked person or chief evil character in a play.

Mr. Mortimer, perhaps best known for his stories of Rumpole, the lawyer, and Leslie Titmus, has gathered a broad selection of prose and poems. It was, as he said in the introduction, difficult as "the field stretches toward infinity." Villains, he says, are far easier to write about than saints and that is what gives them their enormous vitality. They are indeed vital in the selections in this book.

Atheists won't be convinced

By Morley Walker
Staff Writer

How Can I Believe When I Live in a World Like This?: by Reginald Stackhouse,
147 pp., Harper Collins, Toronto, $9.95 (paper).

Though he obviously intends otherwise, Dr. Reginald Stackhouse is preaching to the converted.

This slender tome, re-issued in softcover after its original 1990 publication, provides the modern intellectual Christian's rebuttal to the atheist's denial of the existence of a benevolent creator.

It has the same folksy flavor of a similar work of populist theology, Rabbi Harold Kushner's 1981 best-seller, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, and it's clearly aimed at the same lay audience.

Dr. Stackhouse, a theology professor at the University of Toronto and a former Conservative Member of Parliament, provides a coherent overview of how thinkers from Aristotle forward have dealt with the so-called "problem of evil."

He writes in admirably clear prose and illustrates his philosophical points with well-chosen anecdotes.

Why does a murderer prosper while good men suffer? Why does an earthquake level a packed church on a Sunday morning? Why does cancer strike a two-year-old?

In the face of such inexplicable calamities, the man of God has a tough time convincing the nihilist that a rational creator is awake at the world's switch.

Dr. Stackhouse fares no better than most. He is, in fact, better at debunking simplistic religious orthodoxies, such as "It is God's will," than overturning the agnostic's doubt.

In fact, Dr. Stackhouse's main argument in favor of religious belief is that it is the more comforting position.

"It may not bring a cure, restore a loved one, win a victory, or avert an evil. But don't give it up. It will give you something that each of us needs when we are about to drown in a world of troubles."

Even the hardened atheist will not deny this bromide. But Dr. Stackhouse fails to acknowledge that non-believers do not choose their position for personal advantage; they reach it after using their faculties to observe the randomness of existence.

Dr. Stackhouse's sincerity aside, the gulf between believers and infidels remains as wide as ever.

. . . and he has a deft touch with the easy read

By David Williamson
Special to the Free Press

Dunster: by John Mortimer,
296 pp., Toronto, Penguin, $27.99.

Lawyers seem to be able to make an easy transition from practising law to writing novels — take for example the recent American successes, Scott Turow and John Grisham. One obvious reason is that legal cases have a built-in drama and readers of fiction still prefer good suspenseful plots, no matter how much our literary critics and academics would wish it otherwise. But, good as the likes of Mr. Turow and Mr. Grisham are, they can still learn a thing or two from the old master, John Mortimer.

Not only is Mr. Mortimer a former lawyer, he is an English writer whose work travels nicely over to this side of the Atlantic. His latest, *Dunster*, is already a best seller over here.

It was his TV adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* that brought him international attention, but he had already built a considerable reputation with his Rumpole series. His autobiography, *Clinging to the Wreckage*, was much acclaimed and his collection of *London Sunday Times* interviews, *In Character*, is an engaging volume from which the interviewer himself emerges as the star.

To see what the appeal is, one only has to read *Dunster*. Given its references to the Persian Gulf war of last year, this novel have been dashed off rather quickly, yet it is probably as accomplished a piece of popular fiction as you are going to find.

Dunster is one of those "most unforgettable character I've met" novels, in which a male first-person narrator tells about this marvelous fellow he met in school and then proceeds to show what effects that fellow had on his life.

In John Mortimer's novel, the narrator is Philip Progmire and the friend he's fascinated by is Richard Dunster. The story begins with Progmire driving his daughter, Natasha, to school and then heading on to his job as an accountant at Megapolis Television. We learn that Progmire is an amateur actor and wishing he could move into the production side of the TV business. At a Megapolis management meeting, he learn that a new series being planned by his company has brought forth a script written by his old nemesis, Dunster.

This sends Progmire's mind back to his first encounters with Dunster and, through flashbacks, we see other aspects of Progmire's adolescence, such as his first appearances on stage and his first sexual encounter, an hilarious liaison with an older woman:

"I have already made it clear that I am not particularly proud of my seduction by Mrs. Oakshott in her pale pink Gloucester Crescent bathroom, but, looking back on it after so many years, I feel that, on the whole, it was kind of her to take the trouble — especially on a busy night when she had a house full of guests."

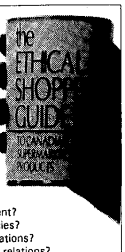
At Oxford, Progmire plays Hamlet and falls in love with Bethany Blair, who plays Ophelia. Dunster, despite being their friend, gives them a bad review in the university newspaper. Philip meets Beth's parents, is well liked by them, and marries Beth, with Dunster as self-appointed best man. A few years later, Dunster reveals that he's been carrying on an affair with Beth; Beth leaves and eventually marries Dunster. John Mortimer skillfully hides this bit of information till about a third of the way into the book; we suddenly see why Progmire dreads renewing acquaintances with Dunster, especially in a work situation.

Dunster's script involves a Second World War incident in northern Italy — all the people in the town of Pomeriggio were massacred while in church. Dunster believes that they were not killed by the Germans as suspected but rather by the British, and, with the help of Beth's father who just happened to have served there, he intends to reveal to the world that the leader of the atrocity was none other than Sir Crispin (Cris) Bellhanger, head of Megapolis and Progmire's boss.

So begins a legal battle that enables Mr. Mortimer to use his courtroom savvy as Cris seeks to avoid scandal by proving Dunster wrong in front of judge and jury.

The novel skips along and offers one plausible surprise after another. The characterizations do not go very deep (and, in fact, their names would be more appropriate in a farce — this novel has some funny moments but is definitely not a farce), but Philip is a sufficiently pleasant and interesting narrator. Dunster is a fine example of the storyteller's art, teasing the reader with hints of what is to come in the manner of Calder Willingham. It is the perfect choice for light reading.

David Williamson is a Winnipeg novelist.



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