

# Getting better and better

By David Williamson  
Special to the Free Press  
The Last Magician: by Janette Turner Hospital, 300 pp., Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, \$19.99 (paper).

"You need a particular blinkered angle of vision in order to sustain belief in linear time," says Charlie Chang, the Chinese Australian protagonist in Janette Turner Hospital's new novel, *The Last Magician*. "Linear time, he said, was a filmmaker's gimmick; inferior filmmaker's gimmick, and before that a gimmick of nineteenth-century novelists."

Linear time is something Ms. Hospital scrupulously avoids in the development of this, her fifth, novel. What we have here is a first person narrator, Lucy Barclay, who looks back over 25 years of the lives of a small group of people in Australia. As William Faulkner might say, "Absorbent time, he said, was a filmmaker's gimmick; inferior filmmaker's gimmick, and before that a gimmick of nineteenth-century novelists."

Having rebelled against her private school upbringing, Lucy becomes a prostitute and sometimes waitress working in an establishment called Charlie's Place (generally referred to as Charlie's Place by the patrons). The restaurant and pub are on the main floor, the rooms the prostitutes use on the second. This place is on the edge of a suburban town known as the quarry. "Nobody knows exactly where it begins or where it ends, most people have only hearsay and their fears and nightmares to guide them. Everyone knows certain details of course, the quarry brushes us like cobwebs in unused rooms, some of us descend into it and climb back out... some merely descend, everyone has felt glancing glows, flashbacks, nudgings, fights, stabblings, sexual assaults, drug transactions, break-ins, the numerous small acts of arson, the blasings and tunnelling) but it is difficult to pin down facts." (The quarry is in Sydney, not Brisbane as the book's cover blurb states).

There is a woman appropriately named Cat who may or may not have been home in this nether world. Charlie and Lucy would like to locate her. She haunts Charlie's photographs and in fact haunts the lives of everyone who comes in contact with her. She grew up with Charlie and another woman named Catherine who eventually became a TV personality. A fourth contemporary, Robson Gray, is now a judge and may know more about what happened to Cat than anyone would care to discover. For a time, Lucy becomes the lover of Gray, Gabriel, and Gabriel too falls under Cat's spell.

In the present of the novel, Lucy works for Catherine, and some readers may be skeptical about how easy Lucy moves from prostitution into television. Apparently Ms. Hospital means no cynical observation here; she makes a connection in the way certain people like interviewers and ladies of the night use silence: "With a kind of greedy languor, the talkers stretch themselves out in the voluptuous cushions of quietness — something priests and prostitutes, something therapists and interrogators, something bartenders know all too well — the burdened talkers settle in and colonize silence with their unburdenings."

There are some lovely descriptions, particularly those of the rain forest near Brisbane; a part of it called Cedar Creek Falls is given notoriety by a Chang film. There is some fine dialogue — in fact, it is ironic that one of the strongest sections in the book is a scene cast in that most linear of formats, the courtroom drama. Allusions to Dante's work abound but the novel can be enjoyed on its own merits. And plotless as *The Last Magician* may seem, Ms. Hospital builds suspense as Lucy pieces together the fragments of time, remembered speech, observation, feeling and suspicion.



Hospital makes a whodunit work — with a hardy a plot

Janette Turner Hospital won the \$30,000 Seal First Novel Award with *The Ivory Swing* in 1982 and she has never looked back. Her work has grown more accomplished with every book, the novels *The Tiger in the Tiger Pit* (1985), *Borderline* (1985) and *Charades* (1989) and the collections of short stories, *Dislocations* (1986) and *Isobars* (1991). Where in the past some of her lush metaphors seemed inappropriate to the material and her prose often fluctuated between journalistic and flowery, the language in the new novels seems entirely suited to the story. Mixing Australian idiom with dense introspection and fanciful with real in a completely appealing way, Ms. Hospital has performed a kind of magic herself. The characters are perhaps more pawns but we still come to care about them. *The Last Magician* (the title mainly refers to Charlie but it embraces other effects) succeeds in combining an engrossing whodunit with insightful observations of the contemporary world and presenting everything in a complex but accessible design.

David Williamson is a Winnipeg novelist.

# We're not that nice after all

By Scott Van Wynsberghe  
Special to the Free Press  
Crime and Punishment in Canada: by D. Owen Carrigan, 544 pp., Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, \$24.95.

As a country that perpetually insists on judging itself as being "nice" — one almost expects to find the word in the Constitution — Canada does not need a reputation as a crime-ridden jungle. A daily ration of jarring news reports does nothing, however, to protect us from such an image. What went wrong, we wonder, how could so nice a place harbor so many miscreants? Actually, Canadian crime is as old as Canada, but this is not a fact easy to convey because it seems generations of scholars have overlooked the requirement for a rigorous history of crime and criminal justice here. Merely bucking that trend deserves applause, so we are indebted to D. Owen Carrigan, a history professor and former president of St. Mary's University, in Halifax. His *Crime and Punishment in Canada* may be the first book since being the first of its kind, but it is also a reservoir of valuable information on the subject — and is a guaranteed eye-opener.

Prof. Carrigan makes clear that Canadians have been killing, robbing, molesting and otherwise mistreating each other in considerable numbers from the start. The level of criminality may have intensified over the centuries, but there is no doubt we have always been doing nasty things. "In fact," the author argues, "the subject has been a crime-free society, Canada has had its fair share of lawbreaking, which can be traced to the very earliest days of exploration and settlement."

Prior to injecting his subject with a certain fielded a small army of fur-trading frontiersmen who are now celebrated in legend but were not always so in reality. Some of these coarse fellows he calls says Prof. Carrigan "cheated, stole, murdered, deceived the Indians, and turned many native women into prostitutes." The more-sedentary inhabitants of what is now Quebec were generally less disreputable, but the period 1712-1759 still witnessed the indictment of almost a thousand individuals. The charges included 52 cases of murder.

If anything, the pre-conquest British settlements were even worse than their French opposites. Prof. Carrigan does not spare his own town. "Halifax was founded in 1749 and the settlers were hardly off the boat when the thievery began." As a vital staging point for the early cases of child abuse in all of Canadian history, Halifax was also infested with violently rowdy soldiers and sailors, as well as the sort of people willing to do anything to strip them of their money.

The consolidation of the British Empire in North America did not produce a kinder, gentler society. In 1819, what is now Ontario witnessed what Prof. Carrigan terms "one of the most notorious cases of child abuse in all of Canadian history" when a fiend threw his stepson out into a wintry night, left the child there until he was almost dead, then brought him back and literally roasted him alive in the fire place. Needless to say, this was an unusual incident, but the times were still quite rough. The author found that Upper Canada suffered not less than a dozen riots during the 1820s and 1830s, while at least two of the region's magistrates were convicted of assault in that period — one of them twice. Bytown (the future Ottawa) was terrorized by thugs called "Shiners" during the next two decades. Alcohol figured in all the above, and the author is forced to conclude that, "The liquor trade was so pervasive that it might almost be characterized as endemic to the society of pioneer Canada."

Booze certainly flooded into the West, particularly during the orgy of railroad construction in the late 1800s. Camp-following la-

dies who were desperate enough mingled with the bootleggers and the volatile construction crews, helping to instigate an orgy of a different kind. At the same time, Chinese laborers who had been imported like slaves to augment the laying of tracks were doing their bit to introduce the young country to opium. For British Columbians of the day, this narcotics connection was less significant than the fact that these Chinese were Chinese, and racist rioting erupted as early as 1852.

By the early 1900s, the foundations of Canada were in place. The population was expanding, and much of that expansion occurred in urban centres, where criminals flourished. Prof. Carrigan unearthed statistics showing over 348,000 reported convictions during 1862-1891 (almost 122,000 were drunkennes). In contrast, 1939 alone produced over 48,000 convictions for indictable offences, while over 428,000 more were obtained for lesser, or "summary," offences. If anything, the rising tide of anarchy evident throughout this century seems consistent enough to undermine the author's contention that the years since the 1960s constituted a special era in which things have gone to hell and the Clifford Olsons and Marc Lepines have taken over. He certainly wins no points with his petulant mutterings about permissiveness and Dr. Spock when he also admits that the children of New France were often spelted rotten, in the same fashion. Prof. Carrigan's heated diatribes regarding contemporary drug abuse seem inappropriate in the context of his own revelations about how much damage has been inflicted on this country by centuries of drunken idleness.

Although Prof. Carrigan ruins his general summary of Canadian crime towards the end by injecting his subject with a certain self-deception, he redeems himself with brilliant chapters dealing with such special topics as white-collar crime, organized crime, femicide, offenders, and juvenile delinquents. His command of the material here is both extensive and restrained. Also, there is no chapter on native Indians. Given that many Canadian penitentiaries are now little more than sorry processing centres for wayward aboriginals, there is excuse for that omission.

The entire second half of *Crime and Punishment in Canada* deals with punishment. Even if it is not as colorful as the first half, it is no less enlightening. While it is clear that modern prisons have degenerated to the degree where inmates can now acquire drugs and rape each other, it is also clear that this laziness is a very new phenomenon. Prof. Carrigan explains that as late as the 1940s a federal inmate could be strapped on his naked rear end for breaking rules, would serve his entire term in near-solitary confinement, and was allowed to speak only under certain circumstances. As late as the 1960s, of course, people were still being executed.

Prisons, then, have simply changed in form of horror to another. The justice system has lost much of its stomach for sending people there, but such alternatives as parole, probation, day passes and group therapy are routinely violated by some offenders, placing the public in danger. Worse, not much rehabilitation seems to come from these methods, while not the slightest deterrence is exerted against the crime rate. Prof. Carrigan ruefully sums up: "Officials at all levels of the judicial system continue to struggle with many of the same problems that their predecessors faced for over 300 years in Canada."

Despite its significant flaws, *Crime and Punishment in Canada* is obligatory reading for any student of Canadian history. The Canada that emerges from its pages is not at all nice. It is a country with a long, criminal and not a real idea what to do about that.

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# Like a rock in the memory

By Robert Saunders  
Special to the Free Press  
Truman: by David McCullough, 1,117 pp., Toronto, Simon & Schuster, \$38.95.

Admiral Ernest J. King was a hard man rancorous in his hatreds, harsh and dogmatic in his judgments. For all that, he had served his country well as head of the United States navy in the Second World War. Now, that war nearly over, he was at Potsdam looking on as neophyte President Harry S. Truman struggled to reach agreement with a power-hungry Stalin and a weary Churchill over the shape of the postwar world.

"Watch the president," King whispered to Churchill's physician, Lord Moran. "This is all new to him but he can take it. He's a more typical American than Roosevelt and he will do a good job." There were many who viewed such unqualified praise from Ernie King.

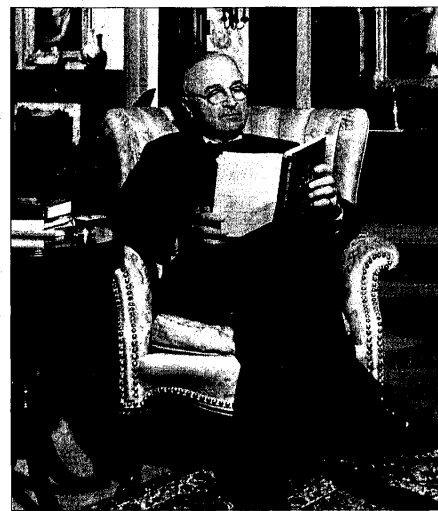
History, however, has endorsed King's verdict and the shining image of Harry Truman is of a doughy little barnum-cock of a man who never ran a fight, forgot a friend or ducked a hard decision.

This is all true enough as far as it goes but it is less than adequate as a just estimate of Truman. He was a much more complex character than most realized. In fact, impression of Truman as the apotheosis of the common man is largely mistaken. For one thing, he was what one historian has described as a "closet intellectual," more widely read in history and biography than most United States presidents. He was, moreover, a devoted lover of classical music. (When Richard Nixon tried to flatter him by playing *The Missouri Waltz* on the piano he was not pleased.) He was a thoughtful, ruminative sort of man and the capacity for making instant decisions with which he was credited was much exaggerated. Even his legendary command of profanity only became noticeable in his later years after he had ceased to be president.

There have been a number of biographies of Truman over the years but none has been so vivid and detailed as David McCullough's *Readers of Morning on Horseback*. His biography of Theodore Roosevelt, will know that Mr. McCullough is the master of clear, swift-paced narrative that invests what he writes with the excitement of a novel. This, emphatically does not mean that Mr. McCullough has skimped on his research. The copiousness of his chapter notes is only one indication of how thorough and exhaustive this research has been.

What is lacking, though, in Mr. McCullough's book is any sustained attempt at analysis or interpretation. For this, the best book is probably still Alonzo L. Hamby's *Beyond the New Deal*, a study of Truman's policies written nearly 20 years ago.

Mr. McCullough's tone is, on the whole, admiring, although he is not blind to Truman's faults. He continues to allow the Korean conflict to escalate into a global war with its attendant nuclear horrors. One is reminded of Macken-



Truman more intellectual than he let on

ment of the egregious Louis Johnson to the post of secretary of defence was an appalling error of judgment. And so forth. It is easy enough to draw up an indictment against any head of state in such momentous times as the Truman years.

Far outweighing these faults are the substantial achievements that can be credited to Truman. If he was unable to do much to advance Franklin Roosevelt's social programs, at least he kept the flag of liberalism flying in the materialistic and self-centred years of prosperity following the Second World War. On the foreign front, there is an impressive list of successful policies which Truman and his administration had a part in implementing. They range from the Marshall Plan and NATO to the creation of the state of Israel and they have done much to shape the course of events for the past 45 years.

Above all, Mr. McCullough believes, Truman should be remembered for his refusal — against the advice of many besides Douglas MacArthur — to allow the Korean conflict to escalate into a global war with its attendant nuclear horrors. One is reminded of Macken-

zie King's remark that his greatest work for Canada consisted in the actions he had refrained from taking.

There is, by the way, no listing for Canada in the extensive index although there is a passing reference in the text to the Gozenko spy disclosures of 1945.

Was Harry Truman a great president? The definition of greatness varies from generation to generation but most historians seem to agree that, by any standards, Truman was not in the same class as Jefferson or Lincoln. There were, nonetheless, elements of greatness in his character and achievements. Perhaps the last work should go to Eric Seaverid, a journalist who observed so much of the history of that era at close range.

I am not sure he was right about the atomic bomb or even Korea," Seaverid declared. "But remembering him reminds people what a man in that office ought to be like. His character, just character. He stands like a rock in memory now."

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# Good questions, few answers

By Michael Finlayson  
Special to the Free Press  
The Dismantling of America: by Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., 180 pp., Mississauga, Random House, \$22.95.

For some years now, under the banner "Tolerance," multiculturalism has been the prevailing cultural policy in the U.S. and Canada. Among other things, this policy would have the effect of encouraging the bilingual and bicultural groups should be officially encouraged to speak the language and practice the values of their respective cultures. Society is, or ought to be, folkloric writ large — a network of peaceful and happy pavilions each containing a distinct garden of fragrantly co-existing values. The potentially tragic and still unfolding consequences of this policy are discussed in this interesting essay by the popular liberal historian, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.

The subject is topical in the light of the recent riots in Los Angeles and the on-going discussions in Canada regarding native self-government and a "renewed" federalism. Though his discussion is confined to the United States, the principles involved are universal.

After outlining the history of the idea of U.S. society as a melting pot concerned with individual rights and freedoms, he examines the situation today. The essence of his diagnosis is that the line between multiculturalism and incoherence has become blurred, if not extinguished, so that a current definition of multiculturalism would include the following principles: there is no legitimate reason to prefer the values of one culture to that of another; if children are to realize their potential, they must respect themselves and unless their education emphasizes the historical contributions of their particular ethnic heritage and highlights heroes of the same ethnicity, then self-esteem is improbable. Ergo, the focus of concern for individual rights, the focus is now upon "group rights"; assimilation is equated with oppression; ethnic groups compete for government largesse. Accordingly, curricula and textbooks must be revised, history re-written, constitutions amended and language laws enacted, all to preserve and protect the self-esteem and values of blacks, natives, francophones and a growing number of other ethnic victims.

How far has this gone? Consider some examples:

- 1) A significant portion of black intellectuals contend that black children should be educated by blacks and apart from whites; they seek segregation;
- 2) In California, at issue before the State Board of Education were textbooks and their responsiveness to the new curriculum. Polish-Americans demanded that any reference to Hitler's holocaust be accompanied by accounts of equivalent genocide suffered by Polish Christians. Armenian-Americans sought coverage of Turkish massacres; Turkish-Americans objected. Though black historians testified that the treatment of black history was exemplary, Afrocentrists said the schoolbooks would lead to "textbook genocide." Muslims complained that an illustration of an Islamic warrior with a raised scimitar stereotyped Muslims as terrorists;
- 3) The influence of the Iroquois in the State of New York was sufficient to ensure their political system was described in the curriculum as one of the three pillars of the U.S. Constitution;
- 4) When a student sent a memorandum to the "diversity education committee" at the University of Pennsylvania mentioning her "deep regard for the individual," a college administrator returned the paper with the word "individual" underlined: "This is a red flag phrase today, which is considered by many to be racist. Arguments that champion the individual over the group will identify the individual's belonging to the largest or dominant group";
- 5) In a region of Canada it is an offence for a business to have a sign in other than the French language.

Mr. Schlesinger appears unwilling or unable to draw the conclusions to which his essay ineluctably tends: for within the confines of an essay, could he reasonably be expected to deal in any detail with the impact that any change in government policy would have upon such areas as education, immigration and citizenship, and bilingualism and French immersion, to name only a few. He succeeds admirably, however, in raising the right questions in a thoughtful, probing fashion.

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