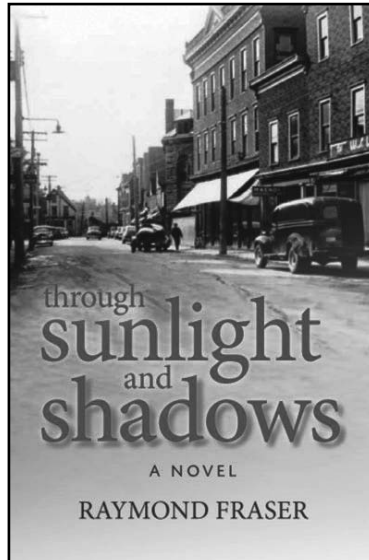


Trevor Sawler

Through Sunlight and Shadows

Raymond Fraser

Pottersfield Press, 2018. 238 pages.



For some reason, I only started reading Raymond Fraser's work a couple of years ago. There is no easily identifiable reason for this. I had been aware of him for a very long time, but kept putting off the task of reading his work. I have no idea why. Perhaps it was because of the sheer quantity of material I would have to go through: at that time, Fraser had written thirteen books, six collections of poetry, and three works of non-fiction. That's a lot to go through, but given the fact that I spend at least three hours every day reading, it hardly justifies putting him off. More likely, it's because of an entirely unwarranted but nevertheless deep-seated belief that Canadian writers are, by default, not as important as their counterparts across the pond or south of the border. Don't blame me for this (decidedly inaccurate) knee-jerk reaction; it comes from studying literature at a time when it was commonly believed that if a writer was not part of the so-called

“Canon,” they were assumed to be relatively unimportant. I’ve struggled with this attitude for quite some time, and am, thankfully, gradually overcoming it.

My introduction to Fraser came in the form of his thirteenth novel, *Seasons of Discontent*, which featured one of his best known and most loved characters, Walt McBride. That book gets no small measure of credit for helping me to overcome my inherent distrust of fiction and poetry outside the Canon; it is an outstanding novel, and after reading it I immediately immersed myself in Fraser’s other books.

Fraser’s fourteenth novel, and sadly his last, returns Walt McBride’s world, but this time in an autobiographical format. It gives us McBride as a young boy growing up in the small New Brunswick town of Bannonbridge during the 1940s and 50s. Regular readers have come to know McBride very well, but until now, his early life remained largely unexplored. This changes in *Through Sunlight and Shadows*:

I really don’t know what age I was during the times of my earliest memories. I don’t know the age I was when I learned what age I was or when I did learn when it meant something to me other than a reply if someone asked me. I certainly had no notion early on of what a calendar constituted. All it was to me was a nice picture on the wall with mysterious markings beneath it.

As you can see, we begin our exploration of Walt’s early days at a very young age. Given the time period, one might expect that the novel would suffer from what I like to call the “good old days syndrome”—a thick patina of nostalgia which portrays a simpler, happier time. Fortunately, nothing could be further from the truth. While it is true that Bannonbridge is presented as what the young McBride calls “the greatest place in the world to grow up in,” and he has lots of friends and playmates, the reader is painfully aware that McBride lives in a house with no plumbing, no electricity, no central heating, and that Walt and his family share the house with the Flynns—and they have ten children. This is hardly the household of Beaver Cleaver.

Given Fraser’s careful avoidance of nostalgia, one

might think that this novel was intended as a kind of cautionary tale, one that is intended to speak out against the many, many material things that children seem to have—Nintendos, a wealth of hockey gear, four wheelers, and so forth—in today’s world in order to be considered raised properly. It is considerably more than that. In fact, if I were forced to compare the intent of this book with one that, interestingly enough, is considered to be part of the Canon of literature, I would be compelled to draw comparisons between this novel and Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. While it is true that Walt McBride is worlds away from Stephen Dedalus, there is a fair bit of commonality between the two protagonists. We see both Walt and Stephen from their earliest ages, we watch them both grow up, choose a vocation, struggle with addiction, and ultimately strive to become writers. However, *Through Sunlight and Shadows* is not merely an homage to Joyce; Stephen leaves behind Ireland, whereas Walt comes back to Bannonbridge.

Sadly, we lost Raymond Fraser earlier this year, and unless there is some undiscovered, nearly finished novel hidden away somewhere, this is the last book we will see from him. If, like me, you have been putting off reading his books—for whatever reason—I strongly encourage you to give him a try. You will not be disappointed.