

Prairie Pandemonium

Crime caper a diverting debut

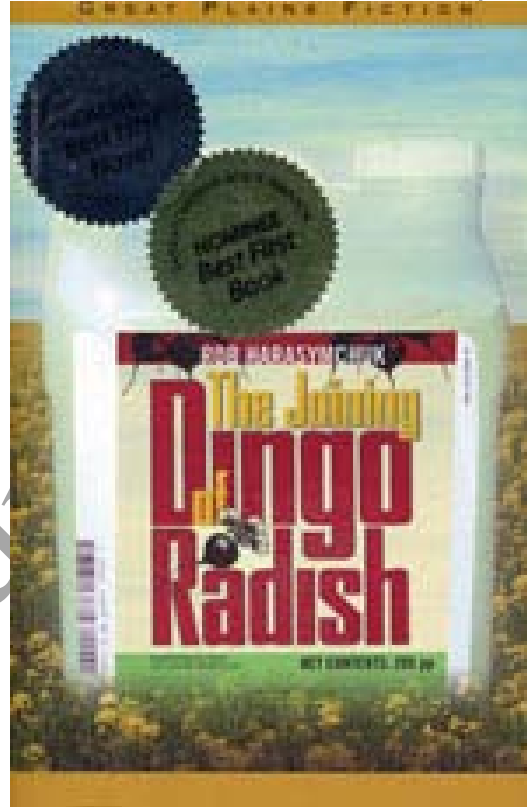
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Debut novels are always tricky. Most often they—and their authors—sink into obscurity within a few short months of publication, neither to be seen again. But avid readers (this reviewer amongst them) live in the eternal hope of discovering a fresh new voice which will at least temporarily satisfy their unquenchable thirst for new reading material. This week's pick is by just such a writer, and fittingly his work sweeps across the literary landscape like a fresh breeze from the Prairies, relieving the doldrums of summer.

Rob Harasymchuk

Rob Harasymchuk's own publishing experience is surely a cautionary tale for all aspiring writers. Although his high school teacher told Rob that he had a gift for the written word, publishers, it seemed, didn't share her enthusiasm. He racked up more than four hundred rejections for his manuscript from disinterested, then despairing, editors. While lesser mortals might have abandoned their quest after a few dozen rejections, Rob was not easily discouraged: he simply waited a few months, and submitted the same manuscript again, sometimes under another name, to the same publishing houses (having run out of alternative presses). As he tells it, some publishers even threatened legal action if he didn't stop bothering them!



Fortunately for readers, Rob is not a man to take rejection seriously. He persisted, and eventually encountered an editor with an open mind. The result is this week's pick, the tale of an engaging anti-hero who struggles to lift his family out of poverty and lead them to a better life, and whose only resources are his wits. It is a breezy, action-filled story that will appeal to readers who recognize that many people's lives are circumscribed by poverty, and that breaking this cycle sometimes requires a bold step. Along the way, the author raises some telling issues about the growing trend toward

chemically-based agribusiness that is fundamentally transforming Canadian farming.

When he is not writing, Rob makes his living as a “buggy skinner”, or heavy equipment operator, having worked in construction camps in the Northwest Territories, BC, and Saskatchewan. He lives in Saskatoon with his wife and daughter.

The Joining of Dingo Radish
(Great Plains Publishing, 2005)

Lord knows it isn't easy growing up in the small town of Bennington Falls on the Canadian Prairies, but it's a whole lot tougher when your dad is Slavic, and saddles you at birth with the formidable handle of Dingonaslav Marion Radashonovich. It wasn't long, of course, before that became Dingo Radish, and the name stuck. But Dingo didn't really blame his folks, since his dad was a drunkard and his mother spent much of her time staring off into the distance. As he entered adulthood they weren't around much either, the result of having a close encounter with a freight train at a level crossing. Dingo was left to raise his precocious (the townspeople say slutty) sister Marty and his intellectually-challenged younger brother, known as Patch. He took a minimum-wage job at a local farm supplier to keep a roof over their heads, and looked for a way to carve out a better life.

It was obvious that Dingo wasn't going to get anywhere by remaining a hired hand. An enterprising sort, he noticed the high markup on chemical pesticides, and went to his boss, Garland Nazaram, with a proposition: he would loot the warehouses of other farm suppliers and wholesalers, and pass the goods on to his boss, who would retail them to local farmers. They would split the profits. Nothing large-scale, understand. A few

boxes here and there wouldn't be noticed.

On the shady side himself, Nazaram is open to the offer. For a few months things go smoothly, until Marty comes home pregnant. Dingo realizes he's at a crossroads: with another mouth to feed, they have to get out. It's either now or never. So he plans one last, large heist that will spell freedom for them all: the Radishes are headed for Mexico.

Whoever said “make no small plans” can't have had Dingo Radish in mind. On paper his scheme is perfect, even elegant in its simplicity; Dingo will hijack a tractor-trailer load of the most expensive pesticide on the market—worth several million dollars—from a nearby factory, and split the proceeds with his boss, who can unload the stuff over years. What Dingo doesn't know is that a group of environmental activists have also targeted the company, for their own reasons. And there remains yet another surprise in store, one that will send Dingo's mind reeling, spell death in the quiet community, and lead him on a desperate quest to save his family from a group of callous killers.

Quirky, faced-paced, gripping

The Joining of Dingo Radish combines a quirky protagonist with fast-paced action and a gripping climax. Although it has its share of explicit language and graphic violence, the writing is also leavened with comedic moments and self-deprecating humour. Rob effectively captures the strong regional flavour of prairie life in an original and entertaining tale. It is an impressive debut and a welcome addition to the Canadian crime-writing scene.

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