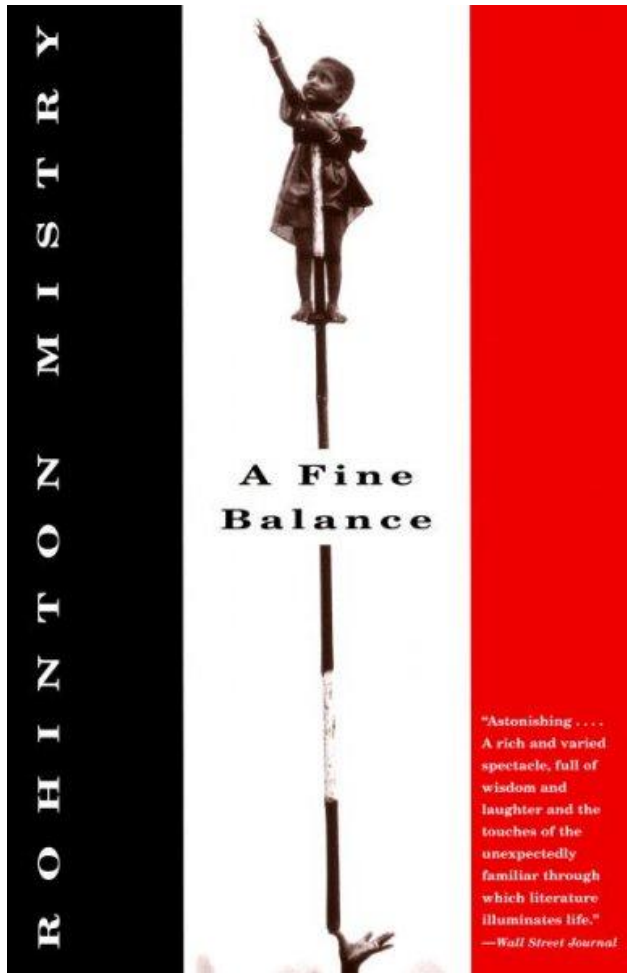


About the book...



“With a compassionate realism and narrative sweep that recall the work of Charles Dickens, this magnificent novel captures all the cruelty and corruption, dignity and heroism, of India. The time is 1975. The place is an unnamed city by the sea. The government has just declared a State of Emergency, in whose upheavals four strangers--a spirited widow, a young student uprooted from his idyllic hill station, and two tailors who have fled the caste violence of their native village—will be thrust together, forced to share one cramped apartment and an uncertain future.

As the characters move from distrust to friendship and from friendship to love, *A Fine Balance* creates an enduring panorama of the human spirit in an inhuman state.”

About the Author... <http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth73>



“Rohinton Mistry was born in Bombay (now Mumbai), India in 1952. He graduated with a degree in Mathematics from the University of Bombay in 1974, and emigrated to Canada with his wife the following year, settling in Toronto, where he worked as a bank clerk, studying English and Philosophy part-time at the University of Toronto and completing his second degree in 1982.

Mistry wrote his first short story, 'One Sunday', in 1983, winning First Prize in the Canadian Hart House Literary Contest (an award he also won the following year for his short story 'Auspicious Occasion'). It was followed in 1985 by the Annual Contributors' Award from the Canadian Fiction Magazine, and afterwards, with the aid of a Canada Council grant, he left his job to become a full-time writer.

His early stories were published in a number of Canadian magazines, and his short-story collection, *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, was first published in Canada in 1987 (later published in the UK in 1992). He is the author of three novels: *Such a Long Journey* (1991), the story of a Bombay bank clerk who unwittingly becomes involved in a fraud committed by the government, which won the Commonwealth Writers Prize (Overall Winner, Best Book), *A Fine Balance* (1996), set during the State of Emergency in India in the 1970s, and *Family Matters* (2002), which tells the story of an elderly Parsi widower living in Bombay with his step-children. *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance* were both shortlisted in previous years for the Booker Prize for Fiction, and *Family Matters* was shortlisted for the 2002 Man Booker Prize for Fiction."

Reviews

Kirkus Reviews

"From the Toronto-based Mistry (*Such a Long Journey*, 1991), a splendid tale of contemporary India that, in chronicling the sufferings of outcasts and innocents trying to survive in the "State of Internal Emergency" of the 1970s, grapples with the great question of how to live in the face of death and despair. Though Mistry is too fine a writer to indulge in polemics, this second novel is also a quietly passionate indictment of a corrupt and ineluctably cruel society. India under Indira Gandhi has become a country ruled by thugs who maim and kill for money and power. The four protagonists (all victims of the times) are: Dina, 40-ish, poor and widowed after only three years of marriage; Maneck, the son of an old school friend of Dina's; and two tailors, Ishvar and his nephew Om, members of the Untouchable caste. For a few months, this unlikely quartet share a tranquil happiness in a nameless city--a city of squalid streets teeming with beggars, where politicians, in the name of progress, abuse the poor and the powerless. Dina, whose dreams of attending college ended when her father died, is now trying to support herself with seamstress work; Maneck, a tenderhearted boy, has been sent to college because the family business is failing; and the two tailors find work with Dina. Though the four survive encounters with various thugs and are saved from disaster by a quirky character known as the Beggarmaster, the times are not propitious for happiness. On a visit back home, Om and Ishvar are forcibly sterilized; Maneck, devastated by the murder of an activist classmate, goes abroad. But Dina and the tailors, who have learned "to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair," keep going. A sweeping story, in a thoroughly Indian setting, that combines Dickens's vivid sympathy for the poor with Solzhenitsyn's controlled outrage, celebrating both the resilience of the human spirit and the searing heartbreak of failed dreams."

Review Excerpted from *BlogCritics Magazine*

(<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2003/06/06/145356.php>)

"Dave Eggers can joke about it, but heartbreaking works of staggering genius are still produced, and "A Fine Balance" by Rohinton Mistry is one. That's my humble opinion, anyway. Why, you ask. What makes this a work of art, a genuinely

moving experience? I don't know, but for two weeks and 600 pages, I lived in India in the 1970s. I ate chapatis cooked by a skinny teenager in a small apartment. Thanks to the independent spirit and vision of my father, I learned a trade, sewing, that I could use to escape the cruel slavery of my village's caste system. I felt the crack of the police officer's truncheon against my elderly skull, not just the violence but the cold, impersonal nature of the injustice. I watched in horror as men with great power, and my Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, directed acts of violence safe in the knowledge that they could escape justice (in this world). I lived it all through four main characters, and a rich panoply of supporting players. These four – a single woman on her own, a college student, and an uncle and his nephew struggling with poverty in a big city – have little in common, except an independent streak. They don't believe in passive acceptance of their intended lot in life...”

Review Excerpted from *Time Magazine*

(<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,257164,00.html>)

“For some readers, the final 200 pages of two-time Booker Prize nominee Rohinton Mistry's 1995 novel *A Fine Balance* were an out-of-body reading experience. You forgot the day of the week. You forgot where you were. Interruptions were waved off impatiently. The only sound that registered was the breaking of your heart. As one harrowing scene followed another, you silently pleaded with the author to spare his characters. They had already suffered so much. They deserved even an Indian long shot at happiness. It was not to be, for balance had been lost, both in the Bombay of Indira Gandhi's 1975 Emergency and in Mistry's fearsome vision of the city where he was born and raised. When a novelist of his caliber despairs at human cruelty, the results are often annihilating. . .”

Literary Criticism

Title: *A Fine Balance*

Author(s): W.H. New

Source: *Journal of Modern Literature*. (Summer 2000): p565. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Book review

Rohinton Mistry. *A Fine Balance*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1995. 748 pp. \$15.00 paper.

The two books which I published in 1998, *Borderlands* and *Land Sliding*, are not under review here; I mention them to provide a frame of reference, a way to shape my own understanding of some of the most striking works that Canadian writers published between 1994 and 2000. The subtitle of *Land Sliding* tells what that book is about: "Imagining Space, Presence, and Power in Canadian Writing." I suspect that the book began thirty years ago, when I was

studying geomorphology rather than literature, but it came into its current focus only recently. Like many other Canadians, I had long been impatient with the barrenland snowscape cliché that Hollywood uses so often to characterize my home country, an image that Jacques Cartier coined when he mused that Labrador must be "the land God gave to Cain" and that Voltaire, in *Candide*, reconfirmed when he dismissed Canada as "quelques arpents de neige." However smart these quips might be, they have little to do with most Canadians' daily lives in the twenty-first century. And yet, because the snowscape image has been repeated so often and because Canadian culture has been so influenced by European and American assumptions, the snowscape mindset continues to exert undue power. Our problems with the mindset are several: how to counter it; how to explain it without explaining it away; how to come to terms with the way that it works and with the ways in which, in so many literary works within Canada, it has been supplanted.

Land Sliding takes the image of "land" and demonstrates that the meaning of the word "slides" over place and over time. An introductory section on "land-forms" deals with current landscape theory, discussing the means by which "land" turns from an apparently simple denotative term into a baggage-laden concept--place and space, position and situation--turns, that is, into a text that can be read. Surveying Canadian writing, the book then goes on to examine various authors who have read their world or been caught up in others' readings of it, from the Sublime to feng shui. Separate chapters consider "land" as territoriality (the competing power codes of Contact writing), property (the interrelated codes of ownership and the picturesque: utility, productivity, profit, and gender precedence), region (the codes of home and away, political precedence and marginalization), and site. The last of these turns from land (seen as an external phenomenon) to language (seen as a compositional field, in which the page itself, whether in print form or electronic, is a landscape for communication). *Borderlands*, which began as three lectures in the Brenda and David McLean Canadian Studies lecture series at the University of British Columbia, takes up a related metaphor--that of the border--and asks why it is so prevalent in Canadian cultural rhetoric: as borderline, demarcating "us" from "others" (which primarily but not exclusively means "Americans"), and as borderland, the often intangible territory of exchange and negotiation wherein Canadian cultural change happens. In its characteristically evolutionary (rather than revolutionary) way, such change emphasizes the fact that culture here is more accurately seen as a process than as a commodity. The borderland image also underscores the way Canadian culture tends to

prefer pluralities to binaries, to seek human-sized (and hence "imperfect") heroes, and to find litotes and irony to be accommodating ways to celebrate the self. The three sections of the book, therefore, deal respectively with (in general) the rhetoric of division and accommodation, (by way of focusing) the politics and economics of distinctions between Canada and the United States; and (with politics as a specific example) the structural paradigms and cultural metaphors that shape some differences between works by the British Columbia writer Jack Hodgins and the Washington State writer David Guterson. "How We Talk About Canada"--the subtitle of *Borderlands*--is, in other words, part and parcel of ways in which Canadians talk about their place in the world.

These concerns place into context several of the most arresting works of fiction to have been published recently in Canada, including Audrey Thomas's *Isobel Gunn*, David Adams Richards' *The Bay of Love and Sorrows*, Thomas Wharton's *Icefields*, and Jack Hodgins's *Broken Ground*. All four novels look back to an event or person in the past, revisiting the geographical space in which events happened in order to understand the mental space in which the persons lived--and asking for that mental space to be re-imagined, *Icefields* (Wharton's accomplished first novel; the other books mentioned so far are all mature novels by well established practitioners) in some sense dramatizes this concern most directly. Set against the earliest European "discoveries" of the Rocky Mountain icefields near what is now Jasper, Alberta, the narrative contrasts the expectations of the unimaginative and unprepared explorer with those of the climber, the scientist-observer, the dreamer, the immigrant, the Native informer, and the property-developer and politician, all of whom seek different controlling connections with place, the past, and t,he writing of history-still-to-come. Central to the book is the scientist, whose mis-step into a crevasse opens cracks in his objectivity just as the book begins. Saved from death, he is aware that he thinks he has seen an angel in the ice, but he can tell no one; what he must do, he tells himself, is await the melting, find the angel in the moraine. As fields of ice and fields of understanding start to overlap, the novel takes a series of unexpected turns, until readers are invited to see how much they are themselves implicated in the characters' assumptions about what is real and in the dilemmas that derive from what they think they can know.

Richards' *The Bay of Love and Sorrows* loosely alludes to (if it is not exactly based on) a real-life tale of a man named Donald Marshall, wrongly imprisoned for years and then released

into a different world. The novel tells of a murder in a small New Brunswick town, of the man who is wrongly convicted, and of the slow re-examination of what has been taken for evidence. At first glance, the townspeople seem more like types than like characters--good cop, petty thief, hard-edged woman who runs the gas station--and so they are; but the authorial skill shows in the way Richards teases small town types into lire, gives them dimension. He seems to know that when ordinary people are forced to make serious moral choices, even types become entire human beings, imperfect but believable. Richards' style, too--the novel opens in a series of reflexive sentences, telling the reader structurally to revisit scenes and first impressions--serves his theme: the borders of simple categories usually constrain and enclose; therefore, weigh evidence carefully, do not trust what is merely easy to see.

The title characters of Thomas' *Isobel Gunn* and Atwood's *Alias Grace* are more openly based on real people, and once again their drama depends on the difference between what seems and what might in fact be true. The real-life Isobel Gunn was a nearly illiterate Orkney woman who successfully masqueraded as a man in order to join the workforce of the Hudson's Bay Company's fur-trading posts in wilderness Canada and who indeed spent an extended period of time undiscovered. Atwood's "Grace" is Grace Marks, the convicted murderer in a celebrated nineteenth-century Ontario trial. But just as Atwood's narrative explores the evidence and makes it clear that nothing is clear, so Thomas' probes the reasons for Isobel's mixed decisions and finds likelihood and ambiguity rather than fixed fact. That Grace was convicted is an historical truth, but that she was guilty is more dubious: she might have been convicted because of her class and lack of education more than because she did the deed, and because the victim was of "quality," or she might have been devious enough to use the appearance of innocence to hide a real guilt. That Isobel left the Orkneys for Canada is also fact, but we do not know why she did so. Thomas hypothesizes that poverty and intelligence were credible reasons, but not the only ones; there was also imagination--the promise of Canada being not "barren," but a land of trees.

Like the real Isobel, the fictional character here is discovered when she becomes pregnant: a consequence not of passion, but of violent rape on the part of the one man who knew her identity. To summarize what happens next, the child becomes the favorite of the factor, who then effectively blackmails Isobel into giving him up, promising to secure his future in the

Company if she removes herself from the boy's life and returns alone to Scotland. By contrast, when Grace is finally released from prison, she at once heads with a new partner across the border into anonymity and the United States. But while Grace's story at this point somehow dissolves into farce, Thomas does not stop with Isobel's ostensible disgrace. The tragedy of Isobel is that she falls into poverty and despair and lives out her life in regret, desperately writing into silence to try to find her son. Both books hinge on there being an interlocutor for the women: someone who will record their tales. For Grace, it is a medical doctor, whose interviews with the prisoner (and for me these are the most vivid and enduring sections of the novel) turn into meditations on nineteenth-century sciences of the mind, the place of "deviance" in the pharmacopoeia of desire. For Isobel, it is a man named Magnus, who has promised to help Isobel, but who, like others before him, fails her. Atwood's narrative is constructed to demonstrate the place of bias in the construction of truth; Thomas', partly because it reads Magnus' flaws as well as Isobel's determination, reveals both the force of one character's loss and the perennial inadequacy of the other's attempts at self-justification.

Something of this dual vision permeates Jack Hodgins' wonderful novel *Broken Ground* as well, for while it focuses on the losses that the members of one family suffer, and their attempts to retrieve some semblance of self-respect from years of refusal and denial, it also tells a gripping tale of the fact that an entire community must come to terms with its attempt to live outside its own history. The novel begins in fragments of story. An entire community of characters tries to tell about the past, about how a forest fire once decimated a small settlement and became the vivifying moment in memory. Each person, however, can retrieve only part of a narrative, and slowly the reader comes to realize that the fragments--sometimes dour, sometimes breathtakingly exaggerated--weave several other kinds of story. For one, the fragments turn out to be the interviews in a documentary film; this film is the brainchild of a youngster in the community, who has taken it upon himself to Tell History. The only problem is that the stories of the fire (true up to a point, within the borders of bias and faulty memory) are the townspeople's way of avoiding the memory of the real critical moment in their past, the years of the First World War, when the men returned from France maimed and determined to forget. Their repressed memories--of loss, guilt, fear, self-justification, responsibility--fragment their presumably normal lives just as the War fragmented the entire century's belief in a stable community of values, a uniform "point-of-view." So now they live on "broken ground," and the women who live with them find that the

men often wander mentally away. Farming and logging at the margins of success, they till what they can, relying on irony and dislocation to see them through, and while this strategy turns out to be inadequate--it leads to further losses, further failures of recognition and refusals of truth--the novel nevertheless engages the reader in their plight. It tracks the older characters into the past, inviting them (and readers with them) to come to terms with their decisions, their mistakes, their small triumphs and large disasters, and their ordinary, flawed human nature. The children of the wartime years, moreover, gradually discover that they, too, have to face their demons. A central character of this generation, a boy named Charlie at the beginning of the book, becomes the adult narrator of the book's last section; it is he who realizes that the "film version" of history satisfies only those who would live behind a mask. He also realizes how much he himself has spent his life withdrawing from the realities of the world. Afraid to commit (because commitment has led his parents' generation to loss, guilt, fear), he finds loss, guilt, fear, and self-justification anyway, and finds them to be just as dislocating, just as much the consequence of "broken ground," as those of the European battlefields. One conclusion to a book exposing such insights might well be despair; another would be didactic moralism. Neither is Hodgins' choice, for while happiness does not reign supreme in the closing paragraphs, nor does meaninglessness. Here, the site of contradiction is not simply a burden, but a challenge, and the novel is an engrossing examination of the fields on which we stand.

Fields, in the plural. For Canadian writings do not, of course, affirm a single field of discourse, nor a uniform perspective (that's part of the point of the multivoicedness of *Broken Ground*), and hence the border-crossing that characterizes numerous recent books suggests another feature of Canadian culture: its increasing consciousness of its multiple heritage. The most obvious examples of such a claim would be such effective works as Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* and Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. They are by no means the only inquiries into Canada's Asian connections (names such as Sky Lee, Hiromi Goto, Ven Begamudre, and Hiro McIlwraith leap to mind), and the many voices that claim Middle Eastern, European, Caribbean, African, and South Pacific heritage within Canada add to the diversity that border-crossing sometimes affirms. Both Mistry's and Ondaatje's novels look back at their author's place of birth and early education--Bombay and Sri Lanka, respectively--and in one sense reclaim a specific past rather than affirm a complex present. But to rest with this observation would be to under-read both accomplishments. Mistry's novel tells of two Harijan tailors

whose attempts to flee poverty and find a quietly rewarding life in the city are thwarted by bureaucracy, the greed of others, powerful rivalries, and the arbitrary punitiveness of Mrs. Gandhi's Emergency policies in the 1970s. A wrenching tale--one that the reader resists finishing (but must finish) because a few pages from the end it comes to seem inevitable that the characters are doomed--*A Fine Balance* is, however, as deeply, if implicitly, critical of reactionary politics in, say, Ontario as it is fiercely critical of Gandhian imperatives. For its part, Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (set in the present, at a time when civil war continues to rack Sri Lanka) also probes a more general sensibility than the particular mystery on which it hangs its narrative line. It tells of an anthropologist whose bone discoveries, if pursued, will tell tales on government authorities; the past becomes a ghost, as it were, haunting life (like the Argentinian desaparecidos about whom poets such as Eli Mandel have written), and the authorities take pains to curtail inquiry. Elegantly phrased, the novel gradually turns, then, from being a sedate thriller into becoming a powerful metaphor for that process by which the past--anywhere--revisits the present and for what any present does with its past. (Mavis Gallant, in a story called "From the 15th District," runs a wry variant on this theme; she tells of ghosts who are haunted by the living--by those who, constantly attempting to rewrite their personal histories, keep disrupting the peace of those whom they have failed.) The substance of history, in other words, invokes borderlands of both desire and disbelief.

Guy Vanderhaeghe's powerful novel *The Englishman's Boy* and Anne Carson's equally powerful poem sequence *Autobiography of Red* pursue related motifs. Like Hodgins, Vanderhaeghe distinguishes between film versions of history and the idea of truth that history purports to convey. For her part, Carson adapts the Classical tale of Stesichoros' Geryon (one of Herakles' challenges) to present-day preoccupations with "difference." Along the way, she challenges easy (for which read conventional, traditional, normative, accepted) definitions of the heroic and the monstrous and the borderline that divides the one from the other. Vanderhaeghe tells a twinned story: one line apparently records a narrative involving the ragtag band of horsemen who in the nineteenth century rode through the central plains, across the "Medicine Line" into what is now southern Saskatchewan, and ended up involved in the Cypress Hills Massacre; the other line takes a 1920s Saskatchewan scriptwriter to Hollywood in search of a job, only to find that he is assigned the task of interviewing a cowboy who might actually have participated in that nineteenth-century ride and of rewriting his story into Hollywood pap. While the novel brilliantly evokes the past (Vanderhaeghe is a

trained historian, as well as a writer of drama and fiction) and exposes the degree to which we understand it only as it is filtered through some medium of rearrangement, it also sympathizes with the temptations facing the screenwriter. Does he follow the convention, use the cliches, reinscribe banal versions of heroism and the frontier--and keep his job--or does he write from the heart, write imaginatively of what he comes to understand, and surfer the likelihood of being excluded from fortune and fame? The narrative in Carson's poem also crosses literal political borders, but any attempt to underscore further similarities with Vanderhaeghe would likely distort both accomplishments. Carson's concern is with the outcast, the red "monster" whose childhood and adult life (recorded as a poetic "autobiography") lead him more to exclusion, ridicule, and fear of the hunter than to the ordinary friendships which he desires. It is a tale of a victim wanting to be something else, and learning to be, period. Allegorically, perhaps, the poem can be read as an inquiry into gay sexuality, into the hierarchies of assumed power that follow on political ignorance, into the viciousness of unthinking collective power, into the cult of heroism and the psychology of decay. It can be further read as a footnote to the Classics by an engaged and informed critic. More immediately, it can be appreciated for its technical skill, its adaptation of Classical metrics to the contemporary vernacular, the vividness of its imagery and the cadence of its lines.

Or it can be read for its critique of so-called "normative" culture, calling that culture into question for its hypocrisy, as well as for its petty cruelties and large infatuation with violence. These subjects are even more clearly the subject of Michael Turner's *The Pornographer's Poem*, which (explicit in its sexual detail) could well prove offensive to some readers but is nevertheless more politically caustic and socially acute than it is indulgent. Turner's intention has more to do with explicating why the hypocrisies of middle-class life are offensive. Told as the life-story of an urban middle-class boy who becomes preoccupied with his own sexuality (and the very wide range of desires and dissatisfactions to which it leads), it records what follows when he begins also to focus on the sexual preoccupations of his neighborhood. What begins as an adolescent lark, when he covertly films his neighbors' antics, turns into a business. But then, as the narrative progresses, the business turns him ultimately into a victim of those people who mn the business of pornography. Of those who buy it. Of the very middle class people, in other words, who have produced him, who have the money to buy, and who would judge him for supplying them with the product they at once privately enjoy

and publicly want to be seen to condemn. The novel, moreover, told in question-and-answer format (a celestial trial, perhaps) and looping filmically back to the beginning, turns readers into middle-class voyeurs themselves, so that, no matter what their judgment is, they cannot excuse themselves from their involvement in the education of the next generation. What is it that a culture values, Turner explicitly asks. And when its actions differ from the values to which a culture gives lip service (linguistic game-playing is one of the novel's self-reflexive devices), what are the consequences of its behavior?

In some ways, a series of other works suggests answers to these questions, although they differ from Turner's own. Turner's novel ends violently (inside the narrative) and with a psychosocial violence (in the framing strategy), for by making readers complicit as it were in the industry, Turner requires them to question themselves, question their placidity and question their capacity to rationalize. Works by Alice Munro, Ray Smith, and Wayne Johnston--for whom the borderlands of moral standard invariably intersect with the borderlands of time--also consider the consequences of private acts, but the cruelties and injustices that they represent along the way are never exclusive of random happinesses, and they finally evolve in any event into a violence of recognition more than a violence of act. The stories collected in Munro's *The Love of a Good Woman*, for example, all turn on the decisions that a series of women make in their lives, decisions that have consequences other than what they have anticipated, and which they finally nevertheless do not regret. It is this conclusion that turns conventions around. In the brilliant story "The Children Stay," for example, a woman becomes involved in a theatrical performance (the Orpheus and Eurydice story), then leaves her husband and children to go off with another man. The story focuses primarily on the process leading up to the decision, then shifts abruptly to a time some years afterwards when the woman is meeting again with her now grown children. One kind of conventional story would involve guilt and repentance; another would scariate the ex-husband's failings; a third would pillory the woman and dramatize the children's traumas. Munro adopts none of these strategies. Here, the story lies in the ordinariness of what happens, which is not what one would think. The children grow into presumably normal people; they do not particularly resent their mother; the mother is concerned about them but does not regret leaving them. For Munro, that is, "story" is neither linear nor one-dimensional; story layers narrative--and as these stories make clear, no one ever knows how many layers there are. While clearly the woman was Eurydice in the play, it turns out that it is not Orpheus

(as the children believe, as the reader is invited to infer) with whom she ran off. Nor with whom she stayed. Or at least, that story did not become the story of her life; her life was something different, something she did not plan for or count on, but which happened. The "something other" that happens in all lives, in other words--"No, not Orpheus. Never him"--is the event that few people are ready for, and fewer embrace, but these stories suggest that the readiness to accept the pacing of one's life (or one's story) means everything.

In *The Man Who Loved Jane Austen*, Ray Smith constructs a more devastated world, wherein the death of a woman leads to a man's desolation; widowed, liberal, loving, the husband tries alone to bring up his two sons, on a small salary at a Montreal college where his academic specialization (Austen) is out of fashion. But he has no room to manoeuvre, and his wife's parents (wealthy, influential, snobbish, and mean: using social power as a weapon) manipulate their connections with academia and the law to make him appear incompetent and to steal his children from him. That they succeed is the novel's most harrowing conclusion; that (unknown to her husband) their daughter has been on the point of leaving him for another man is its central irony; that the man has no recourse except to return home to Cape Breton, integrity intact within himself, is its quiet affirmation that value has not been lost entirely from the world. But the novel does more than tell a story; funny as well as harrowing, it ends up as a political allegory inside separatist Quebec, angry not only at the separatists but also at those other Canadians who would give up what they love simply because they have been asked to. This family, in Smith's hands, is a whole society in civil dispute, subject to manipulation and open to despair, but deeply, finally, motivated by love as well as money. As in Austen's novels--another feature of this book is that it adapts Austen's characters to modern-day Montreal: the mother-in-law's prototype is Lady Catherine de Bourgh--love and money are often at war, however; and here, the power of the one to rule the power of the other indicates a society out of joint, occupying space but not inhabiting it well.

Yet that space and person do connect is clear from Wayne Johnston's eloquent memoir, *Baltimore's Mansion*. Johnston's subject is Newfoundland and the mindset that Newfoundland encourages, and a powerful sense of place is realized in passages both descriptive and anecdotal. More than anything else, the book is a story of love and hardship within one family, of the history of settlement that turns a passion for place into family

commitments and political ties. But the book also tells, in dialogues of the heart, of what happens when generations leave the island. To find himself, the author has to come to terms with his father and with his father's dreams for a Newfoundland outside Canada, giving voice to two generations' versions of yet another divisive politics in the country.

But as John Ralston Saul observes in *Reflections of a Siamese Twin: Canada at the End of the Twentieth Century*, such division is very much a paradoxical element within the Canadian political psyche, serving the cause of federation rather than of disintegration--if Canadians will let it work. Quoting in his epigraph from Thomas Wharton's *Icefields*--to the effect that exposed ice looks dull and undifferentiated, but ice under the surface shows an "intricate crystalline structure"--Saul (the husband of Adrienne Poy Clarkson, Canada's current Governor General, that is, the head of state as distinct from the head of government) turns on its end the conventional metaphor of the barren land of ice and snow. In a series of sharply phrased, cogent essays on Canadian myths and realities, he draws on literature, history, and his own observations of social behavior to argue the strength of Confederation. He dismisses the easy myths of boredom, victimhood, and isolation, argues that nordicity is not a synonym for solitude, demonstrates that neighborhood persists through quarrel as well as subsists in agreement. But unitariness--in the sense of uniformity--is not the ideal here. Nor is an untethered individualism. Community is. And Canadians' capacity for building a communal society out of multiple diversities demonstrates not only their strength of national desire but also their political imagination. The essays are not naive; Saul acknowledges the stresses of poverty, regional rivalry, gender conflict, and the vagaries of elitism. But trouble arises, he affirms, not from these alone--they are not absolutes--but when conditions give them room to grow; such conditions are in evidence whenever the society abandons its accustomed unusual strategies for articulating a civic nationalism and accepts instead the (global, economic, ethnic--and divisive) "facts of power." As, perhaps, now.

Two of the most interesting of recent critical books at once provide an outgoing frame for these reflections and a demonstration of two strategies through which criticism, too, demonstrates its fascination with multiple perspectives. Stan Dragland's *Floating Voice* sensitively re-examines the life of a writer named Duncan Campbell Scott, one who revolutionized the English-language Canadian short story in the 1890s, who wrote some much-anthologized poems (often on so-called "Indian" themes), and who a decade later

became a well-meaning but misguided federal bureaucrat: in the name of social integration, he perpetuated stereotypes of the Native peoples and devised treaty systems that would marginalize and diminish them for decades to come. Absorbingly, Dragland reconstructs Scott's mindset, traces his youth and family, his job and the social contexts for his job; and he shows how Scott's preoccupation with being the civilized man at home in the wilderness falsified his perceptions both of wilderness and of what he defined as civilization. Reading, as literature, the treaty texts as well as the poetry, Dragland revises conventional judgments of Scott, his writing, and his rime; he extends contemporary understanding of all three; and he manages that rarest of critical achievements: to balance political disapproval with literary appreciation. Such balance is also the aim of the essays that Ajay Heble, Donna Palmateer Pennee, and J.R. (Tim) Struthers have assembled as *New Contexts of Canadian Criticism*. Designing their book to reflect (and revisit) Eli Mandel's *Contexts of Canadian Criticism* (1971), and dedicated to his memory, the editors of this volume assemble twenty-six more recent essays that range over gender and genre, race and class, critical and pedagogic methodologies, theory and intellectual history, Native rights and multiculturalism. Divergent and edgy, this is a book about some ways to read. For those who are unfamiliar with Canada, the land, the people, their literature, and their preoccupations, it is a useful anthology through which to become acquainted. For those who believe themselves to be already familiar, it is an invitation to rethink the conventions, locate the new writers, and read again.

(1) William H. New, "Ice Crystals," *Journal of Modern Literature* XXIII, 3-4 (Summer 2000), pp. 565-573. [c]Indiana University Press, 2001.

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Source Citation

New, W.H. "A Fine Balance." *Journal of Modern Literature* (2000): 565. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 18 July 2011.

Discussion Questions

(http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides/F/fine_balance1.asp)

1. Why has Mistry chosen not to name the Prime Minister or the City by the Sea, when they are easily recognizable? Does recognition of these elements make any difference in your attitude toward the story?
2. Is Nusswan presented entirely as a villain, or does he have redeeming features? What are his real feelings toward Dina?
3. How does Dina's position within her family reflect the position of women in her culture and social class? Is the status of Om's sisters the same as Dina's, or different? What sorts of comparisons can you make between the roles and functions of women in India (as represented in this novel) and in America?
4. Post-Independence India has seen much religious and ethnic violence: for instance, the mutual slaughter of Hindus and Muslims after Partition (1947), during which Ishvar and Narayan saved Ashraf and his family, and the hunting down and killing of Sikhs after the Prime Minister's murder, witnessed by Maneck. How does the behavior of the characters in the novel, ordinary Hindus, Parsis, and Muslims, contrast with the hatred that inspired these terrible acts? How much of this hatred seems to be fomented by political leaders? Dukhi observes bitterly "that at least his Muslim friend treated him better than his Hindu brothers" [p. 115]. What does this say about ethnic and religious loyalties, as opposed to personal ones?
5. After Rustom's death, Dina's primary goal is self-reliance. But as the novel progresses and she makes new friends, she begins to change her ideas. "We'll see how independent you are when the goondas come back and break your head open," Dina says to Maneck [p. 433]. Does she find in the end that real self-reliance is possible, or even desirable? Does she change her definition of self-reliance?
6. Most people seem indifferent or hostile to the Prime Minister and her Emergency policies, but a few characters, like Mrs. Gupta and Nusswan, support her. What does the endorsement of such people indicate about the Prime Minister? Can you compare the Prime Minister and her supporters with other political leaders and parties in today's world?
7. Why does Avinash's chess set become so important to Maneck, who comes to see chess as the game of life? "The rules should always allow someone to win," says Om, while Maneck replies, "Sometimes, no one wins" [p. 410]. How do the events of the novel resemble the various moves and positions in chess?
8. Dina distances herself from the political ferment of the period: "Government problemsÑgames played by people in power," she tells Ishvar. "It doesn't affect ordinary people like us" [p. 75]. But in the end it does affect all of them, drastically. Why do some, like Dina and Maneck, refuse to involve themselves in

politics while others, like Narayan and Avinash, eagerly do so? Which position is the better or wiser one?

9. When Ishvar and Om are incarcerated in the labor camp, Ishvar asks what crime they have committed. "It's not a question of crime and punishment--it's problem and solution," says the foreman [p. 338]. If it is true that there is a problem--the vast number of homeless people and beggars on city streets--what would a proper and humane solution be?

10. People at the bottom of the economic heap frequently blame so-called middlemen: people like Dina, who makes her living through other people's labor, or like Ibrahim the rent collector. Do such middlemen strike you as making money immorally? Who are the real villains?

11. How would you sum up Beggarmaster: Is he ruthless, kind, or a bit of both? Does he redeem himself by his thoughtful acts, the seriousness with which he takes his responsibilities toward his dependents? In a world this cruel, are such simple categories as "good" and "bad" even applicable?

12. When Beggarmaster draws Shankar, Shankar's mother, and himself, he represents himself as a freak just like the other two. What does this vision he has of himself tell us about him?

13. The government's birth control program is enforced with violence and cruelty, with sterilization quotas and forced vasectomies. But is birth control policy in itself a bad thing? Dina tells Om, for example, "Two children only. At the most, three. Haven't you been listening to the family planning people?" [p. 466]. How might family planning be implemented in a humane fashion?

14. After Dina's father dies, her family life is blighted until she marries Rustom. In later years, she chooses to withdraw from her natural family; it is not until her year with the tailors and Maneck that she again comes to know what a family might be. What constitutes a family? What other examples of unconventional "families" do you find in the novel?

15. Why do Ishvar, Om, and Dina survive, in their diminished ways, while Maneck finally gives up? Is it due to something in their pasts, their childhoods, their families, their characters?

16. "People forget how vulnerable they are despite their shirts and shoes and briefcases," says Beggarmaster, "how this hungry and cruel world could strip them, put them in the same position as my beggars" [p. 493]. Does *A Fine Balance* show people's vulnerability, or their fortitude?

17. What effect is achieved by the novel's mildly comic ending, with Om and Ishvar clowning around at Dina's door? Is the ending appropriate, or off-balance?

18. The novel gives us a vivid picture of life for members of the untouchable caste in remote villages. Why might such an apparently anachronistic system have survived into the late twentieth century? Does it resemble any other social systems with which you are acquainted? Why do so few of its victims fight the system, as Narayan does? Why do so few leave the village: is it from necessity, social conservatism, respect for tradition?

Multimedia

A stage adaptation of the novel by the [Tamasha Theatre Company](#) was produced at the [Hampstead Theatre](#) in London, England in 2006.

Readalikes

Fiction

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy (1997)

A Suitable Boy by Vikram Seth (1993)

Sister of My Heart: A Novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (1999)

Listening Now by Anjana Appachana (1998)

The Inheritance of Loss by Kiran Desai (2006)

The Space Between Us: A Novel by Thrity Umrigar (2005)

Family Matters by Rohinton Mistry (2002)

Non-fiction

In Spite of the Gods: The Rise of Modern India by Edward Luce (2007)

City of Djinn: A Year in Delhi by William Dalrymple (1993)



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