

Book Reviews

***Candyman*. By Simone Poirier-Bures. Ottawa: Oberon, 1994. Pp. 157. \$25.95. Paper, \$12.95.**

Cities inhabit us as we inhabit them. In ways we likely cannot even imagine they shape our lives, providing us with a place that we can either escape to or escape from. The city in which we grow up forms the bedrock of our experience. Subsequent dwelling places are regarded in comparison with it, assessed in terms of the home town's luxuries and limitations. In many respects we never leave our original home. It remains with us all our lives, a presence that informs our dreams and our imaginations.

In *Candyman*, the first novel by Halifax native Simone Poirier-Bures, the city of Halifax in the 1950s is as much a tangible presence as any of the characters. The story of Charles and Claire LeBlanc and their young family would have been very different had it taken place elsewhere. Poirier-Bures convincingly evokes the innocence of that decade of postwar expansion and optimism, a time when relationships were built freely on trust, when single-person businesses thrived, and when neighborhood mischief-makers set off firecrackers and climbed fences, but caused little real or lasting damage.

When Charles LeBlanc loses his government desk job, he is in his late fifties. His wife Claire, younger than him by 24 years, is pregnant and they have three small children. His search for employment has yielded no results because, despite his vast experience, nobody wants to hire someone his age. Worry sets in. However, an answer to his dilemma is provided by his children, who create a clamor whenever he makes fudge for them.

Everyone enjoyed candy, he thought. The candy counters in all the corner groceries were always busy. He remembered being at Dan's corner store once when the wholesaler of confectionery arrived. What was it the

children had called him? The Candyman. Here comes the Candyman, they'd said.

The story of Charles LeBlanc, the Candyman, is played out against the backdrop of a growing family and changing times. Initially meeting with modest success, Charles's desire to expand his business is frustrated by limited storage space and by neighborhood burglars. These obstacles are eventually overcome, but life as an independent businessman never leads to prosperity for his family. Instead, achievements are tempered by setbacks: an accident, a heart attack. As his health deteriorates and he grows old, large retailers move in to claim his customers and the business falls into disarray.

His advanced age brings with it other problems. Claire LeBlanc, an intelligent and passionate woman, finds life with a young family and an aging husband severely confining. She yearns for intellectual stimulation, for romantic encounters, things that Charles is manifestly ill-equipped to provide. Her frustration grows and she becomes irritable with her husband, leaving him at home while she goes out dancing at the Jubilee on Saturday nights. As the business flounders and the debts accumulate, she resumes teaching in order to support her family.

In the later chapters, the voice of Poirier-Bures's third-person narrative is provided by the LeBlanc's second daughter, Nicole. It is through her eyes that we witness the final stages of her father's disintegration and her mother's harried pursuit of a better life. And, finally, her own escape from a family, and a city, she finds stifling.

Poirier-Bures's unadorned prose style is an appropriate vehicle with which to re-create these ordinary lives. The story has its basis in the everyday; it is realistic, sometimes painfully so. There is much raw emotion on display here. But the prose is tight and controlled, the descriptive passages related with a crisp economy. Poirier-Bures allows her characters to speak for themselves and to draw us into their story. From the opening pages we hear them articulate longings and ambitions with which we can easily identify. The struggle of the LeBlanc family to overcome financial exigency and persevere in the face of hardship—and to remain a cohesive unit—is absorbing and persuasively depicted.

Poirier-Bures, a fiction writer and essayist who grew up in Halifax but who now teaches English in Blacksburg, Virginia, is adept in her use of setting as well. The streets of the city's north end are described with a

warm and nostalgic eye for the details—the sights and sounds and smells—of life in that part of the world in the 1950s and early 1960s. However, it is a demonstration of her proficiency as a novelist that she retains control of her material and does not allow this to dominate. The story of Charles LeBlanc and his family is universal. We feel the city as a governing presence in the background, feel its pulse and rhythms—we see its development over time and witness the impact of these changes on the LeBlanc family.

Candyman is an accomplished piece of work by a writer who has avoided the pitfalls to which many first novelists fall prey. Poirier-Bures possesses a firm grasp of the novelist's art. Her characters are people we can care about, whose fates matter. The writing is lucid and never descends into sentimentality. And you do not have to be from Halifax in order to appreciate what this book has to offer.

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