

City Hall finds navel lint in city's underbelly

by Doug Saunders

"When I first came to Toronto from Jamaica 15 years ago," a friend once told me, "I entered a deep and long depression. This city is a symphony of grey."

And a symphony with a strong-armed conductor. While one out of five Toronto citizens receives social assistance, local bureaucrats spend their resources banning entrepreneurs from the streets, planning new stadiums and billion-dollar festivals and hiring ever more police to keep us in line.

Toronto's small clique of 'world class' citizens spent thirty years and countless billions making the city acceptable to their cosmopolitan counterparts. They paved paradise and put up a domed stadium. They widened the streets and sterilized the waterfront. They bulldozed the rowhouses and spat white elephant apartment blocks across the landscape.

Machiavelli had the ultimate word on building a 'world-class' city: exploit the underlings to the hilt and throw up a gilded facade to discredit any complaints. Facade and exploitation are the active ingredients in Toronto's alchemy, and the landscape is encrusted in both.

Cary Fagan covers a lot of that landscape in *City Hall and Mrs. God*, a "passionate journey through a changing Toronto." Interviewing his way from the Don to the Humber, he brings the reader to community meetings in Regent Park, patronizing lectures in Bay Street boardrooms and power struggles in City Hall. His panoramic scope has won *Mrs. God*

book

City Hall and Mrs. God
written by Cary Fagan
published by The Mercury Press
152 pages, \$12.95

some major literary awards.

But there is little passion in this glib little book. Fagan begins by comparing himself to V.S. Naipaul, the Trinidadian writer whose travelogues of India and the U.S. South have earned millions by telling American readers what they want to hear.

"What struck me," Fagan tells us, "was that Naipaul had no stake in the place he explored; after writing the book he would leave again, never to return. Because of that he was free to say whatever he wanted, but at the same time it seemed to matter less."

Fagan assures us he will avoid this trap because Toronto (the posh part of Forest Hill, specifically) is his home. He vows to "use this book for my own purposes, to turn it into a doorway through which I can enter the life of a city."

As a doorway, as an introductory primer to the frozen class war that is Toronto, this book shows some initial promise. Fagan provides cameo portraits of familiar Torontonians, both left and right: Michael Shapcott, months before his victory against the Olympic threat; Clifton Joseph, whose riveting and relevant dub poems unfortunately go unquoted; Allan Blott, the billionaire lawyer and crusader against affordable housing.

But the interviews lead us nowhere. They are stifled by Fagan's ambivalence: he offers no

ideas, no conclusions, and no overriding themes. The book seems contrived, a quick hack job sweetened with a few lumps of emotional self-examination.

Examining himself may have been Fagan's biggest mistake: often he comes across as a callous snob. When he holds an interview in one of my favorite Toronto greasy spoons, the Sip and Bite on Parliament Street, he says "its disintegrating condition immediately depressed me," scorns the waiter's ignorance of danishes and describes his desire to flee to a comfortable library.

His appreciation of humans resembles his gastronomical insensitivity. Of Lynn, the unemployed single mother he interviews

at the Sip and Bite, he describes "the gulf I had opened between us" by ordering tomatoes in his grilled cheese: "to ask for something not given," he explains, "required an assurance of one's place and expectations in the world that Lynn did not have."

His interviews with impoverished Torontonians and "east-end people" are often described as "uncomfortable" or "nervous," as if it were perfectly natural to be interviewed by some author who wants to make you a character in his next bestseller.

Indeed, Fagan should probably stick to fiction. As an analysis of Toronto's class struggle, this book

is disturbingly weak; it is rendered truly offensive by his desire to play both a sympathy-provoking character and an omniscient narrator. His final chapter disturbed me: he performs the cathartic "liberating act" of speaking up at a protest meeting and telling us "from now on when I attend it will be as a participant and not as an observer."

He should have made this decision before he began *City Hall and Mrs. God*.

We badly need a good book about Toronto's grassroots struggles. We need some touching personal accounts of life in the western world's most unaffordable city. We do not need another well-fed writer finding himself while slumming downtown.

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