

**MORI MCCRAE'S *SHELF LIFE* IN NIAGARA REGION
CONTEXTS**

By Terry Trowbridge

The Covid pandemic is creating gaps in the public presence of Canadian literature. Live readings are suspended, hand-to-hand book sales are non-existent, literary events that maintain institutional knowledge of who-is-who in CanLit is threatened. Therefore, we ought to look back on poetry books and chapbooks that have been overlooked, undersold, unfairly obscured. We can take the time in lockdown that could help us see what we can remember by writing more detailed, more contextualized book reviews than we normally do. To that end, this is an updated review¹ of *Shelf Life* by Canadian poet Mori McCrae (2017) from the preeminent Niagara Falls, Ontario, small press called Grey Borders.

McCrae tells very short stories about very simple moments that make up a normal day. Her poems are unpretentious and forthright. She does not suppose that her readers want inflated melodrama, and she has no use for hyperbole. Her honesty, in that sense, aligns her with a few of the more active Niagara region poets who write about the surrounding rural history, and separates her from the satire and parody nurtured by Niagara's urbanite and suburbanite poets.

Mori McCrae is a founding member of the Jordan Art Gallery, situated in the center of Jordan Station, a rural hamlet between the city St. Catharines, and suburb Grimsby, on the south shore of Lake Ontario. Jordan Station takes only 30 seconds to drive from end-to-end, and is surrounded by the natural landscape of the Niagara Escarpment and the Bruce Trail. Also, the hamlet is located on curving S-roads that swoop up and down the escarpment. As a cyclist or car driver emerges from woods into a cleared piece of farmland, they can see the lights of Toronto on the other side of the lake. To the east, within an hour's drive, is the border between the USA and Canada at Niagara Falls. Jordan Station, although hidden, has a remarkably lively community of artists. The Jordan community runs the gamut of economic life from the extremely affordable bar at the Jordan Hotel (that caters to migrant farm labour and local farmers), and a vale with a campground (that international backpackers can afford), to world-renowned hotels and bed-and-breakfasts. McCrae has been a key organizer maintaining the rural artist and tourism economy and its international connections. She is an economically important feminist artist and arts activist. The Jordan Art Gallery's nine-member collective has seven women members, making their cultural contribution since 2001 noteworthy; although McCrae's own autobiography takes the form of decades of visual art, rather than self-promotion or creative literature.

As for the tone of her poems. McCrae situates her poems in *Shelf Life* in contemporary rural forests and meadows, which are comparable to Grimsby writer David Haskins' poetry (1980, 2021), and Niagara history (2013); as well as the Niagara-on-the-Lake poetry of Kevin McCabe; and the Welland poetry in the early work of Jade Wallace (2011, 2012, 2017). McCrae does not address the cycle of economic boom and ruin of Thorold's city-dwelling documentarian poet James Millhaven (2017); St. Catharines' working-class documentarians and historical poet Keith Inman (2005, 2020a, 2020b) and Stan Skreszeewski (2016). McCrae does, however, provide a counterpoint of kitchen sink conversation, and the aspirational Niagara life that is achieved by neighbours across the economic spectrum, living next to each other in the mixed economy of the countryside.

McCrae's *Shelf Life* does not experiment with the concrete poetry encouraged by Brock University's creative writing ethos in the past 15 years (Barwin and Betts, 2011; Betts, 2005; Cahill, 2017; Schmaltz, 2018). McCrae's choice of free verse, instead of concrete poetry, might at first seem contradictory because of her visual artist and curatorial roles. However, it might be explainable as generational literary differences.

Free verse, lyrical storytelling might also reflect McCrae's strong liberal feminist credentials as a woman artist sustaining community in a strongly conservative, patriarchally sectarian rural society. Any analysis of Niagara artists and writers must include their relationship to the few established families from whom a plurality of electoral candidates are chosen for all levels of election slates. The critical and experimental standpoints of artists and artist venues must react to granting priorities which flow from Niagara's overdetermined conservative voting blocs. McCrae, a woman artist and art gallery founder, is therefore a complicated and important regional figure. Presumably, her sociopolitical ethos has evolved regarding how the region's development priorities have evolved.

Shelf Life also offers realism where other poets shroud their geographically local realism in sardonic satire (see other poets: Betts, 2014; Brett, 2016; Burgess, 2019; Colangelo, 2020; Conley, 2012; Cox, 2002; Fry, 2016a, 2016b). Again, the difference might be that McCrae is a one of the few Niagara women poets and art gallery owners in a region where Brock University skews toward promoting male points-of-view that assume sarcasm is vital to art; and where women artists have curatorial control but almost never executive power in galleries like the local Niagara Artists' Centre and the internationally noticed Rodman Hall.

Which means that Mori McCrae's poetry fills in a much-needed cultural gap in Niagara's twenty first century literature. There are a couple of realists who write about Niagara, like Jade Wallace's yet-collected short stories, and Jeremy Colangelo's occasional portrait of call center workers. What has been missing from the now burgeoning Niagara literature is an honest portrayal of the reality of life in Niagara; which is that most of the time, it is a nice day outside, the flower garden is taking up time but that's what it's there for, you can hear grandparents and kids over the backyard fences, your friends are all weirdos but that's what they're there for, too.

So, McCrae is not a political poet, or a cyberpoet, or a backhanded contrarian poet. *Shelf Life* is a nice book about low-stress moments for intimate relationships. Overall, McCrae's voice is worth noting because of the recent major demographic shifts in the Niagara region. The economy of southern Ontario is undergoing dramatic changes. More people than ever before are migrating from Toronto and to St. Catharines, Jordan Harbour, Beamsville, Grimsby. The current tsunami of displaced Torontonians therefore is not a new phenomenon, is not disconnected from a history of real estate fluctuations. It was the 1990s wave that is nefariously blamed for the shift from an open society in Niagara to a security theater represented in popular consciousness by fences and the end of street parties for the Grape and Wine Festival. It is the 1990s wave that is responsible for maintaining a commuter economy when GM obliterated St. Catharines, and Welland was sold out by the factory owners. All of which is documented by various poets. But amidst those demographic upheavals and sociopolitical dramas, the consistencies of the weather, geography, and relationships, are the cultural settings; and they are *Shelf Life's* contribution to that historical narrative.

The connections that McCrae offers are explanations for some obvious but overlooked questions. Why stay in Niagara? Because life is mostly okay. What do you do all day? Instead of commuting, we putter outside (in the Winter we complain). What happens when a region is so divided between college students and 40-somethings, with almost nobody in between age groups?

You get some pretty slow days, but with expansive vocabularies and sumptuous narration of afternoon naps. McCrae can be scathing "just a man/who believes that he's a beast" comes from a short poem that scoffs at every ex-boyfriend. But McCrae, at most, rolls her eyes. Her poems in *Shelf Life* reject shouting accusations, opting instead to quietly reveal a better way of seeing. Even when the poems address a tragic topic, on the following page, she is upbeat and lyrical again.

Ontario's Niagara region is full of people who talk like they are always depressed. Locally recognizable Niagara poets cop an attitude of continuous crisis. That's south of the highway, the Queen Elizabeth Way, which divides Niagara's two cities, St. Catharines and Niagara Falls, the way mitosis divides amoebas. Life is different north of the highway. Or, for that matter, 10 minutes westward or eastward on the QEW. My guess is, that's where *Shelf Life* is the most vivid. Local ethnographers and cultural geographers should read this book to remind themselves that the reason the status quo is ingrained is that, for real, for a lot of people in Niagara, regardless of income or health issues, life is pretty okay.

Buy *Shelf Life* for someone who likes to read but needs to chill out. An older audience will appreciate it more than a younger one. Do you go to a church with a library space? It could use a copy. It would also sell well at a fruit stand on Grimsby's Highway 8, or a fruit stand on Lakeshore Road in Niagara-on-the-Lake, where tourists look for art galleries and dramatic arts. For Toronto writers who have an image of the Niagara poetry as a contest of wills between

Brock University's tenured elite and the deschooling cynicism of poets born and bred into the working class, Mori McCrae provides a necessary woman's voice with local ownership of the culture industry.

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Bio:

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