

Dropped Threads 2

Reviewed by Clara Thomas
Books in Canada

Adrienne Clarkson writes the Foreword to this book; Marjorie Anderson, its chief editor, writes the Introduction and Carol Shields the Afterword. Its collection of "What We Aren't Told" confessionals has impeccable credentials and an overall enthusiasm and professionalism in its conception, planning, writing and publishing. Intrigued by the unexpected success of the original Dropped Threads, Shields and Anderson put out a general call from their website for more essays. They also asked some known writers who responded. The result is a wide-ranging volume whose variety is best appreciated by a leisurely enjoyment of a few at a time rather than a straightforward read-through. I can well understand the enthusiasm with which Anderson writes in her Introduction: "it was an exciting and consuming task....The submissions poured in, each one moving in some way for its honesty and intimacy." The sum-total for the reader, however, would be overwhelming if taken in one dose. A one-word description of the collection would, I believe, be "unpredictable." It is that quality that keeps the reader always questioning, always anxious to turn the next page.

Anderson and Shields have divided their chosen submissions into four parts: "End Notes", "Variations", "Glimpses" and "Nourishment". Anderson differentiates among these in her introduction, but it is difficult for the reader to do so. Our responses to each story will be intensely subjective. Each story offers its own brand of nourishment and what is nourishment to one will inevitably be something different to another. There are frightening stories in each section, of death, betrayal, spousal abuse, parental madness and crippling self-consciousness. Some of them finish with a redeeming upswing of hope, but not all. The exceptions are impossible to forget and the most frightening. The truly horrendous story, "Hiding", ends this way: "This story no longer belongs only to me. It is yours now, too. If you'll take it." We don't want to accept it, but we must. Likewise, there is no mistaking the authenticity of "Inside Talking's" conclusion: "This cancer business is taking over. I cry a lot, but mainly in private. Mood is black, skin is burnt. I am exhausted already and only half way through this leg of the journey." Some of the writers, Sandra Birdsell for instance, infuses her tale of growing up "One of a Bunch" with wonderfully saving laughter, and Wanda Wutannee celebrates her Cree heritage in "We are More Than Our Problems": "I carry hope because of what I see happening in individual lives and because of the many gifts I have been given by my father and my mother—pride in my heritage, an ability to see the beauty of the human spirit and a belief in myself."

The entries by known writers are somewhat more predictable and perhaps less effective for that reason: Flora MacDonald on the sublimation of her parliamentary defeat in the International Aid work that has come to mean so much to her; Maude Barlow on her harrowing meeting with Iraqi women and her concluding highlighting of the weaknesses in our own system; Michele Landsberg on the repressions and intolerance of Toronto in the forties when she was growing up. What each and every submission does, however, is to release its writer into a community of caring and its readers into a welcoming sisterhood of those who speak the unspeakable and all those who listen.

- *Clara Thomas* (Books in Canada)