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Book Review: As for Sinclair Ross

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As for Sinclair Ross. By David Stouck. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. xv + 353 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00.

Long admired by academics and fellow writers for his finely wrought portraits of small-town prairie life in Canada between the wars, and of the restless, complex, desiring souls contained within and by this landscape, Sinclair Ross was an intensely private man who nevertheless craved a wider popular audience for his work. It is thus somewhat ironic that his greatest public notoriety should have come as a result of his posthumous outing by Keith Fraser in *As for Me and My Body* (1997), a memoir documenting Fraser's twenty-seven-year friendship with the author that was affectionately written but rather salaciously reviewed. Even this news was more rapaciously received by the growing coterie of Ross scholars than by the general public, providing as it did a wave of newly minted Canadian queer theorists (myself included)

with the confirmation they needed in disclosing the veiled operations of subversive sexuality in Ross's fiction. It is to David Stouck's credit, in this meticulously researched biography, that he neither shies away from nor overplays Ross's sexual identity, pointing out, through a close reading of the author's texts rather than a cataloguing of his tricks (although there is some of this), that Ross's bisexuality finds fictional expression in the triangulated relationships that recur throughout his best-known works.

As biographical subject, Ross is certainly a Freudian critic's dream. A painfully shy bachelor banker who lived with his domineering mother, Kate, until he was thirty-eight, Ross himself chalked up his "inversion" to the absence of a strong father figure in his life (his parents separated when he was seven). Upon graduating high school, he was forced by economic circumstance to sublimate his deep-seated desire to be an artist—he tried painting and music before settling on writing—into the drudgery of clerical work that he dutifully (if not always happily) performed for the next forty years of his life. Yet, as Stouck explains, difficult family and work environments only tell part of Ross's story; the physical environment of the Dust Bowl prairies clearly impressed itself on his writerly subconscious, so much so that geography, in Ross's published fiction (including the novels *As for Me and My House* [1941] and *Sawbones Memorial* [1974], and the best of his short stories), becomes synonymous with libido. A crop of wheat crushed by hailstones, a tinder-dry field that hasn't seen rain for months, a fierce blizzard that claims homesteader and livestock alike: these and other natural phenomena repeatedly stand in for the spending, thwarting, or misdirecting of desire.

Whenever Ross strayed too far, in his writing, from the prairie landscape of his youth, the results proved disastrous. To this end, Stouck notes that Ross's self-confidence was deeply eroded by the mostly negative reviews that greeted *The Well* (1958) and *Whir of Gold* (1970), novels whose settings fuse the mean streets of Montreal (where the author lived from 1946 to

1969) with the big skies of Saskatchewan, and whose forms attempt to graft the crime novel onto the *Bildungsroman*. Despite these professional setbacks, and the onset of Parkinson's disease that curtailed Ross's planned European retirement, the portrait of the artist in old age that emerges in Stouck's balanced prose is not that of a bitter recluse. Rather, we are presented with a dignified forefather of modern Canadian literature who is genuinely touched by the recognition belatedly coming his way, and who is generously accommodating of the growing community of readers seeking an audience with him (among them Stouck's own students). That community will surely continue to grow as a result of this fine biography.

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