Review of *The Girl in Saskatoon: A Meditation on Friendship, Memory and Murder* by Sharon Butala

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On a warm May evening in 1962, young Saskatoon resident Alexandra Wiwcharuk left her flat to mail some letters and enjoy a little time on the banks of the South Saskatchewan River before reporting in for her night shift as a nurse at City Hospital. Sitting near a weir, she was within sight
of a parking area and city streets. Many others were out that evening, sharing Alex's delight in heat and late sun on a holiday weekend, walking the paths, laughing over jokes and shared gossip, watching children play, and soaking in the city scene. But none of them noticed Alex's disappearance; none of them were aware that a murderer lurked among them. May 18, 1962, Alex Wiwcharuk, one of her city's best and brightest, just at the beginning of her adult life, was brutally raped and killed. Her murder remains a mystery, one that has permanently disturbed the social fabric of this seemingly safe Canadian city. Decades later, a high school classmate, writer Sharon Butala, mulls over these reverberations, feels compelled to recognize Alex's life, and seeks answers to the violence that stunned her community.

Butala's gripping narrative is more than a true crime facsimile. In tracing Alex's origins in a rural Ukranian immigrant community and her trajectory to urban Saskatoon, Butala recreates an era and a working-class milieu that nurtured, limited, and defined young Saskatchewan women of the 1950s and early 1960s. Attuned to class nuances and gender politics of this social period, Butala effectively combines ethnography, criminology, personal reflection, and a novelist's art to sort through the many facets of young womanhood, of popular culture, and of a growing urban center in the Northern Plains.

Alex's status as a beauty queen adds other dimensions to the story and reveals the sexual anxieties of postwar Canada. Alex was a working professional woman, which gave her unparalleled autonomy and freedom. Her violated body, then, becomes a focal point of patriarchal inspection. Did her very sexuality and beauty entice her murderer? Did she have lovers? Did she ask for this violence, sitting alone and lovely on the weir? That the Saskatoon police botched the investigation, that Alex's body was not found for weeks after rain and decay erased evidence, added insult to homicide. Didn't these men take seriously her family's worries, their concerns for this favored daughter's whereabouts? Decades later, Butala attempts to penetrate police silence on this murder and gets nowhere.

Butala's story loops back on itself, recursively following questions, facts, and memories. This structural repetition is part of the narrative's art, capturing the many fits and starts of Butala's investigation, her personal response to Alexandra Wiwcharuk's short, resonant life. In attempting to recreate the sequence of events that led to Alex's murder, Butala also memorializes her own young womanhood, her own generation, and animates the modern history of Saskatoon. Placed within this larger social and political landscape, The Girl in Saskatoon transcends the prurience of true crime nonfiction. It becomes, instead, a profound statement on our fragile humanity and the stubborn resistance of evil.

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