

FICTION

THE SKY IS FALLING

By Caroline Adderson

Thomas Allen, 310 pages, \$32.95
REVIEWED BY T. F. RIGELHOF

If you like Chekhov, you'll love Jane Z.

Caroline Adderson is a genius at picking out small details that reveal larger traits in the personalities of her characters

When you think back to the school year 1983-84, what do you remember two decades later? Who were your friends? What were your obsessions? Where did they lead you? How did they shape the rest of your life – so far? For Jane Z. and her housemates on one of the numbered streets within 15 minutes walking distance of the campus of the University of British Columbia, that year becomes the hottest spot in the Cold War in ways that put unexpected spins on their bad imaginings.

Caroline Adderson's *The Sky is Falling* is both a return to Jane Z.'s sophomore year of living dangerously as a member of NAG, a non-violent, anti-nuclear direct action group and Jane's later reflections on the ways the paranoia and terror of that time have marginalized the lives of those dearest to her.

If you're in the habit of reading Chekhov, Jane Z. is a narrator you want to meet, with stories you really want to read. When you open the first page of *The Sky is Falling*, it's 2004 and spring is right outside Jane's window, filling its frame with snow-white magnolia blossoms. and she's thinking of *The Cherry Orchard* and how she and her UBC housemates once read it out loud on their front porch while they "swilled plonk." And she thinks about "how Pascal betrayed my friend Sonia and she him in turn," and her own part in "that bad, bad decision that we took" that has placed Sonia's picture on the front page of that morning's Vancouver Sun, alongside a story about her release from prison after serving 20 years for a terrorist attack. They had wanted to rid the world of all bombs and they

had set off one of their own.

In autumn, 1983, Jane rents a room in a house she is to share with Sonia, Pascal, Pete and Dieter, and is drawn into NAG not out of idealism but because her first year at UBC was spent commuting 90 minutes and three buses each way between her aunt's house in a suburb east of Vancouver and the university. She's a scholarship winner from Edmonton who feels she's in danger of becoming her aunt, "lonely and eccentric and obsessively cheap." At UBC, she's studying the history of the Soviet Union, learning Russian and reading "Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Solzhenitsyn." Jane is nowhere near as plain, boring, sad, uninteresting, dull, monotonous, pathetic and apathetic, empty, depressed, mournful or despondent as the characters in Chekhov she identifies with, but she is *dissatisfied*.

Jane wants to be as entertaining and insightful in person as she is in the papers she writes for Professor Kopanyev. Her housemates are less interested in helping her discover who she might actually be than in rallying her to their causes: Pete is an anarcho-feminist-pacifist philandering refugee from a Toronto Establishment family; Dieter is a Marxist from Esterhazy, Sask.; Sonia is an eating-disordered neuroathletic from 100 Mile House, B.C., who is trying to alert the world, one person at a time, to impending nuclear catastrophe; and Pascal is a runaway who will do anything asked of him to keep from being returned to his parents before losing his virginity.

With Pete, Dieter and Sonia leading the way, Jane and Pascal are brought up to speed on

world, campus and in-house politics: the Doomsday Clock is set at two minutes to midnight; Ronald Reagan's joint chiefs of staff are predicting nuclear war within six months; the new NFB film *If You Love This Planet* documents physician Helen Caldwell's research into levels of radiation in the food chain after Three Mile Island; the Squamish Five, a local terrorist group, is about to go on trial; on-campus protest groups are factionalizing; Belinda, Pete's main squeeze, has joined a radical feminist commune; and NAG embarks on harmless pranks that turn into the dirty trick that sends Sonia and Pete to prison.

Caroline Adderson is one of the few major Canadian writers equally adept at short stories (*Bad Imaginings*, *Pleased to Meet You*) and novels (*A History of Forgetting*, *Sitting Practice*). In both, her writing is swift and accurate, always getting just the right words in just the right order. She's a genius at picking out small details that reveal larger traits in the personalities of her characters as they struggle to free themselves of chronically confused and confusing, anxious and anxiety-inducing behaviour.

But her writing isn't simply deft: Adderson is very, very funny, but her wit is wry, cleverly controlled: *The Sky is Falling* is entertaining and insightful in just the way Jane Z., perennial student of Chekhov, wants to be seen and overheard, and it has the most memorable final chapter of anything I've read in years.

» Contributing reviewer T. F. Rigelhof's Hooked on Canadian Books: The Good, the Better, and the Best Canadian Novels Since 1984 was recently published.

MY BOOKS, MY PLACE » CAROLINE ADDERSON

Caroline Adderson lives in Vancouver. Her new novel, *The Sky is Falling* (reviewed on this page), is about the fear of nuclear war and the love of Russian literature.

This picture explains why e-books will never take off for me. My favourite place to read is the bath. Furthermore, I adore the Russian classics, many of which are long. In print, long translates into weight. I like to feel the actual weight of what I'm reading. *War and Peace* as an e-book? *Oblo-mov*? No thanks.

I am rereading Chekhov, here his long short story *The Duel*. It concerns Ivan Layevsky, who runs away from St. Petersburg to the Crimea with Nadezhda, a married woman, and soon finds himself out of love, in debt, and the object of a eugenics-espousing zoologist's terrifyingly rational hatred. The story is both very funny and peopled with round, real characters whose chronic ennu, unfulfilled longings and stubborn hope define that particular Russian mood.

Chekhov's gift to the world is his characters. Through them he teaches us that what makes a person interesting (and sometimes even good), what endears him to us, are not so much his virtues, but his cumulative flaws: a bad temper, moral weakness, lassitude. Von Koren, the zoologist, tells Layevsky's friend, the gruff, neckless Dr. Samoylenko, "If you were really so very fond of him ... you wouldn't be so blind to his weaknesses, you wouldn't be so tolerant." But we are. We grow madly fond of Layevsky and the faithless Nadezhda, of Dr. Samoylenko's rages in the kitchen and his lending money all around. Even the despicable Von Koren wins us over in the end. If only we could extend the same tolerance to the people in our lives!

Here is my cure for an ungenerous heart, for boredom, for disillusionment: three drops of lavender oil in a hot, full tub; a glass of wine; something Russian to read.

Try it. And try not to drop the book in.



Adderson, with her Jack Russell Terrier Mickey, with a volume of Chekhov in her favourite place to read: Just try not to drop the book.

Laura Leyshon for The Globe and Mail

FRESH NEW FICTION

HECTOR AND THE SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS
François Lelord
Hector is a young psychiatrist in Paris who does not understand how his patients can be unhappy in his beautiful city. He decides to travel around the world to observe people, hoping to find the secret to happiness. A charming parable about modern life, already a bestseller in Europe!
Our Price\$17.50

EMPIRE OF ILLUSION
Chris Hedges
The Pulitzer Prize-winning author charts the dramatic and disturbing rise of a post-literate society that craves fantasy, ecstasy and illusion, and rejects the print-based, literate world that can cope with complexity and separate falsehood from truth. Hedges navigates this culture and exposes an age of terrifying decline and heightened self-delusion.
Our Price\$19.95

Save even more with a BOOK CITY Loyalty Card!

SAVAGES
Don Wilson
Part-time environmentalist and philanthropist Ben and his buddy run a marijuana operation, reaping significant profits from their loyal clientele. But now the Mexican Baja Cartel wants in, setting off a dizzying array of ingenious negotiations and gripping plot twists that expose the costs of freedom and the price of one amazing high.
Our Price\$26.10

SANCTUARY LINE
Jane Urquhart
Set in the present day on a farm at the shores of Lake Erie, this stunning new novel weaves elements from the 19th Century into a gradually unfolding contemporary story. Urquhart explores how the past makes us who we are, and reveals the sometimes difficult path to understanding and forgiveness.
Our Price\$27.00

FREEDOM
Jonathan Franzen
The Berglunds were the gentrifiers, the hands-on parents, the Whole Foods generation doing their small part to build a better world. But now they have become a mystery. Franzen's novel is an epic of contemporary love and marriage which comically and tragically captures the temptations and burdens of liberty, and an indelible and deeply moving portrait of our time.
Our Price\$31.50

ALL UNDER \$10.00!

HUNGER'S BRIDES
An epic novel of genius, obsession and mystery surrounding a Baroque-era nun.
Pub. List ~~25.00~~Now \$4.99

GRANTA BOOK OF THE AMERICAN SHORT STORY
A selection of the best works of American short fiction from the last 50 years.
Pub. List ~~16.95~~Now \$5.99

MONDRIAN
Full colour reproductions of the greatest works of the iconic colour block artist.
Pub. List ~~24.95~~Now \$6.99

366: A LEAP YEAR
A historian's calendar! Momentous events in history, one for each day of a leap year.
Pub. List ~~22.00~~Now \$7.99

BASKET TALES OF THE GRANDMOTHERS
Myths, ghost stories and fables from over 100 Native American societies.
Pub. List ~~29.95~~Now \$7.99

OUTWITTING HISTORY
The amazing adventures of a man who rescued a million Yiddish books.
Pub. List ~~24.95~~Now \$7.99

TORONTO CITY WALKS
Rediscover your city with this card deck of 50 self-guided walking tours!
Pub. List ~~47.95~~Now \$7.99

JOURNAL
The diary of a young Jewish woman in occupied Paris from April 1942 to March 1944.
Pub. List ~~33.95~~Now \$8.99

STYLEPEDIA
Watch your kerning! A guide to graphic design mannerisms, quirks, and conceits.
Pub. List ~~29.95~~Now \$9.99

And nourishing non-fiction, too!

View these titles & more at www.bookcity.ca

Open late seven nights a week

2350 Bloor West, 501 Bloor West, 348 Danforth,
1950 Queen East, 1430 Yonge St. and 716 Queen West

FICTION

ZERO HISTORY

By William Gibson

Putnam, 404 pages, \$31

REVIEWED BY MATT KAVANAGH

Back to the future and back again

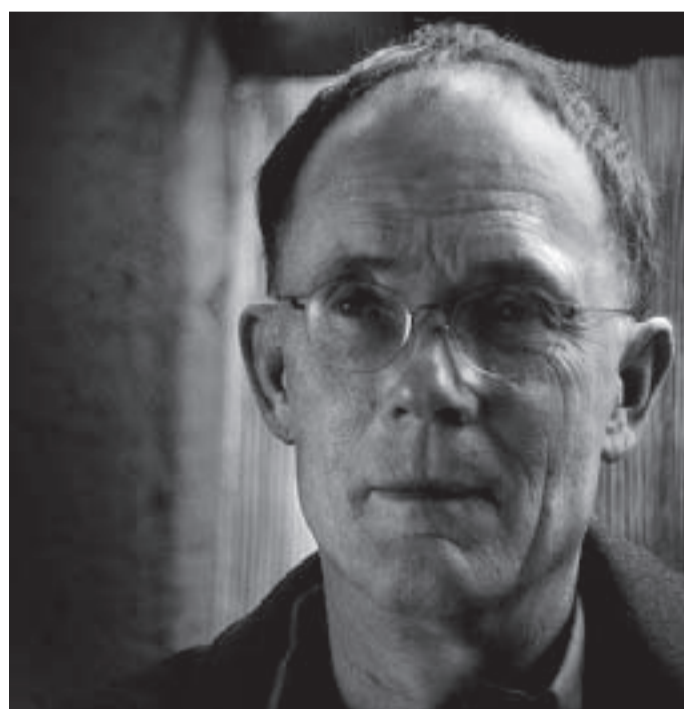
William Gibson's *Zero History* maps the intersection of military contracting and fashion

After revolutionizing science fiction with a downbeat yet oddly familiar vision of the near future, beginning with his debut novel *Neuromancer* in 1984, William Gibson has ventured into new territory – the spy thriller – with a set of novels that look briefly backward, examining our recent history by way of digital art, signals intelligence and postmodern advertising. The gloom of the 2008 financial crisis pervades his latest effort, the final entry in a post-9/11 trilogy consisting of 2003's *Pattern Recognition*, 2007's *Spook Country* and now, *Zero History*.

The first of these books re-creates the spectacle of 9/11 through the frantic search for the creator of "the footage," a viral video sensation whose complex scenes of grief and longing obsess fans in much the same way that the endlessly repeated loops of the falling towers traumatized a nation. The second takes on corruption and the Iraq War in the form of a missing shipping container filled with the ill-gotten gains of war profiteers. Now, *Zero History* maps the unlikely intersection of military contracting and fashion.

The story alternates between the perspectives of Hollis Henry and Milgrim, both of whom are holdovers from Gibson's last novel, *Spook Country*. Hollis is a one-time rock star (thankful for having a pre-YouTube career) and, most recently, author of a study on locative art, in which artists use GPS co-ordinates to virtually annotate the real world. Heady stuff in 2007, but the creative edge has since migrated to the mainstream, in no small part due to Hollis's intervention: "Now it's all iPhone apps," she explains.

Hollis has been brought to London and tasked with hunting down the creator of the mysterious Gabriel Hounds, designer clothing that has



Gibson: Third book in the trilogy is a standout thriller and vital introduction to the author's trademark style.

generated muted buzz by virtue of the fact it is a "secret" brand with "no regular retail outlets, no catalogue, no web presence aside from a few cryptic mentions on fashion blogs." Her employer, advertising magnate Hubertus Bigend, is intrigued at the thought of a fellow savant on his turf: "Someone is developing what may be a new way to transmit brand vision," he tells Hollis. "A genuinely provocative use of negative space."

The other narrative follows Milgrim, a recovering addict and Bigend pet project. What he offers his employer is a specific type of situational awareness, a kind of junkie reflex in that he is both professionally inconspicuous and keenly observant. Milgrim finds himself on a clandestine mission to Conway, South Carolina, where he inspects a pair of trousers, takes photos and, eager to document every detail, even makes a rubbing: "a

time-honoured means of stealing information."

Stealth branding and furtive in-seam-fingering may seem like an odd basis for a thriller, but in *Zero History* the market crash affects everyone; even the obscenely successful Bigend is looking to diversify and "recession-proof" his business by getting into military contracting. Between his efforts to stay on top – if not in front – of the latest trend and spying on the competition, Bigend is intent on bringing his advertising agency's strategic and creative resources to bear upon the marketing challenge posed by all-volunteer armies. As one of his experts explains, "the military needed clothing that would appeal to those it needed to recruit."

Hollis and Milgrim soon find themselves in the shadowy realm of covert couture, where they inadvertently antagonize a corrupt arms dealer eager to legitimize his business by se-

curing a plum contract from the U.S. government. Even as she is on the run, Hollis continues to investigate the enigma that is Gabriel Hounds, the secret brand. She learns that its peculiar appeal stems from its refusal to participate in what Gibson calls the fashion bubble. In contrast to consumerism, where innovation and progress are premised on the obliteration of the past (the amnesia of next season) and history is available only as a style (vintage), the Hounds designer offers her work as the recovery of memory: "I discovered the ruins of American manufacturing. I'd been dressing in its products for years, rooting them out of warehouses, thrift shops, but I'd never thought of where they'd come from." The novel – indeed, the trilogy – hinges upon a fateful decision: Should Hollis tell Bigend about the identity of the Gabriel Hounds designer or shield her from his commodifying gaze?

A standout thriller and vital introduction to Gibson's trademark style, *Zero History* also bears the burden of a final volume in a trilogy: tying up loose ends and bringing the overall narrative to satisfying close. Beyond Hollis and Milgrim, a host of characters from the previous two novels make appearances, none more important than Bigend, who is the only character to appear in all three novels. Gibson is clearly fascinated with his creation, who at various points in the narrative resembles Don Draper (of *Mad Men*), a market Mephistopheles, a Bond villain, but above all an all-too-familiar figure from the economic chaos of the last couple of years: "An overly wealthy, dangerously curious fiddler with the world's architect-lectures."

» Matt Kavanagh lives in Kelowna, B.C., where he is chairman of the department of English at Okanagan College.