

NATHALIE COOKE

Inventing Herself

Great Musgrave by Susan Musgrave

Scarborough: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., 1989, 207 pp.

At first glance, *Great Musgrave* is a collection of Susan Musgrave's recent essays, with their trademark blend of the confessional and the sensational, full of Musgrave's playful exaggerations and sense of fun. On closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that these essays are at the eye of the storm of current literary debate on such topics as the status of the self, the significance of the increasingly problematic boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, poetry and prose, high and low art. But Musgrave cuts such a colourful figure in her writing that she distracts her readers, tempting them to look for the author in and behind the work, and not at the work itself. That, however, is where Musgrave is to be found; she is a woman of letters, the creator and the product of her own creation.

As such, she and her method are reminiscent of another colourful figure: Hemingway. The name conjures images not only of the things he wrote, but also – and perhaps more so – of the things he did, the places he visited, the people he knew, the man he was and the man he made himself out to be.

Hemingway's contribution to the tradition lies in the stylistic and technical innovations of his work – the famous iceberg principle – and in the Hemingway persona he described and came to represent. For both these reasons, he makes fascinating reading. So too does Susan Musgrave's *Great Musgrave*, and for similar reasons, since the book's title refers to its subject as well as to its author. Indeed, Susan Musgrave's writing has become more and more intimately connected with her person, her personality and her various personae.

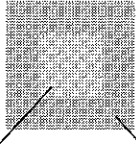
The subject of the book is threefold for Musgrave constructs at least three selves:

1. Musgrave's persona

Critics dubbed this author of ten books of poetry, two novels and two children's books, the "tormented sea witch with 'Medusa-like hair' who explores sexuality at the primal level of bone hurt" (Mus-

grave's own summary). "Tormented," because Musgrave began writing poetry while secluded in a psychiatric institution after a failed suicide attempt. Her poems were discovered and published by Robin Skelton, professor and then editor of *The Malabar Review*. "Sea witch," both because of the title of her first collection of poetry (*Songs of the Sea Witch*, 1970) and because

explanation of why she posed nude for *Saturday Night* (something that should not be spoiled by paraphrase).



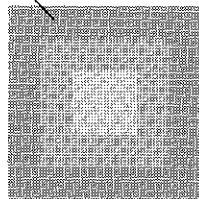
Musgrave's writing Musgrave the writer

of the mystical nature of those poems whose symbolic language grows out of her life on the west coast where she was raised, and where she has now returned to live.

2. Musgrave the personality

One newspaper headline read "witch gives way to woman," suggesting that Musgrave had come down to earth, so to speak. (The original title of the book was *Musgrave Landing*, a play on the name of a small boat mooring on Saltspring Island, just as *Great Musgrave* is a play on the name of a village in Cumbria, England that borders on another called Lesser

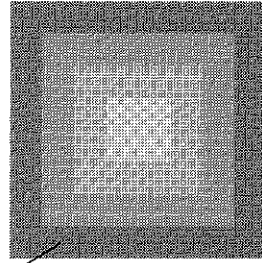
Critical and biographical commentary



Musgrave.) But Musgrave's life is no let-down for her readers. She has been married three times: once to lawyer Jeffrey Green; once to Paul Nelson, the alleged drug smuggler Green successfully defended; and now to Stephen Reid, a bank robber turned author. Her wedding to Reid received considerable publicity, being aired on television, as well as being described by, among others, Musgrave herself.

3. The personable Musgrave

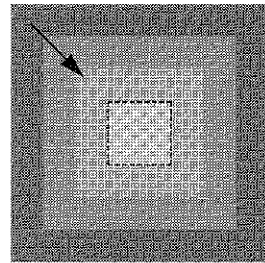
Musgrave now lives with Reid and her two daughters in Sydney, B.C. where she has become a journalist, writing columns for the *Toronto Star*, *Ottawa Citizen*, *Vancouver Sun* and Victoria's *Cut to Magazine*. Her columns contain thoughts on writing and motherhood, usually introduced with an anecdote gleaned from a writer's biography. *Great Musgrave* is a collection of her recent newspaper columns, together with "Wages of Love," an article she first published in *Vancouver Magazine*, and an



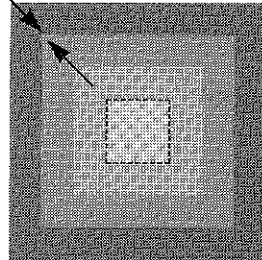
Musgrave's nonfiction (about her life and art)

Musgrave's anecdotal style and her personal, almost casual, tone are deceiving, however, for these essays are highly self-conscious. Not only does Musgrave write about her three different selves in these articles but (and here is the really tricky part) she does this on at least four different levels.

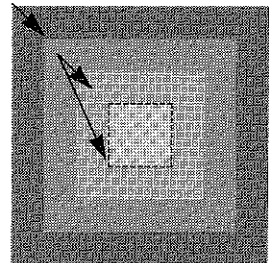
1. Most obviously, she describes her experiences directly, explaining first hand what it is to be a writer and a mother. She confesses to the time spent sharpening pencils and sorting paper clips. She describes the dullness of a writer's life, the minor interruptions of loud radios and bored children.



2. Interspersed throughout such direct confessions are indirect descriptions of her writing. She describes an interview in which she provided a summary of her 1980 novel, *The Charcoal Burners*. "It was about a commune of cannibals living off a commune of vegetarians in the north of British Columbia," or so she says she said.



3. More often and more indirectly still, Musgrave describes the ways in which others describe her or her work. She repeats introductions ("Whenever we hear the name Susan Musgrave in Toronto we automatically think of seaweed"), responses to her novel ("a chilling tale"), as well as critical classification of the poet ("the chance daughter of Allen Ginsberg and Sylvia Plath") and her oeuvre ("dangerous in the extreme").



4. She provides her own responses to such descriptions.

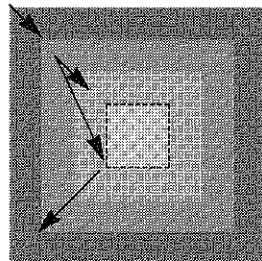
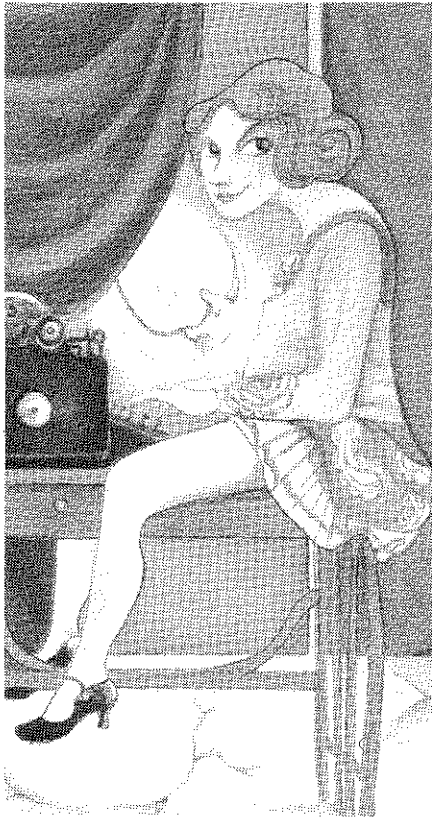


illustration: Kimberly Hart

Of course, one advantage of such an elaborate system of narrative frames is that it allows Musgrave to have the last word. And this is part of the fun. For example, to the criticism, "It's pointless to criticize Musgrave for being Musgrave," she replies, "Rhetorical drone may break my bones but no Envious Prig, no eunuch, no blasted jelly-boned swine of a slimy belly-wriggling sniveling, dribbling, dithering, palsied, pulseless book reviewer was going to hurt me."

But the complex layering of narrative forms also situates Musgrave's work at the centre of current explorations (most of which are considerably more tedious) of the first-person singular as literary device. And this, I suggest, is where the innovation of Musgrave's nonfiction lies.

A self-declared "performer" in person, and an "ironist" on paper, Musgrave is quite aware of the power of the first-person pronoun. Indeed, as Ken Adachi noted as early as 1987, Musgrave was already wrestling with problems of personal expression and identity in her poetry. "A few of the poems," he wrote, "conjured up a sense of a poet looking for a new



little tongue-in-cheek), but rather with her daring escape. And in this book, she makes her break in "The Wages of Love," the longest and most entertaining piece in the collection.

The Great Musgrave's Disappearing Act

Originally published in the fashion supplement of *Vancouver Magazine* (March 1986), this article appears to be a light and entertaining record of Musgrave's romantic encounters around the world. The article is divided into seven sections, each one containing a thumbnail sketch of a particular man, his environment and the reasons for the failure of the relationship. The last section is an exception since it centres on Musgrave's ongoing relationship with her present husband, Stephen Reid. The names seem to be unchanged: Stephen Reid is Stephen Reid, Susan Musgrave is Susan Musgrave. And, despite the necessary brevity of the descriptions, the piece appears to give us a chance to learn more about Musgrave and her love life, two things that have recently attracted much media attention.

The problem is that the character within the story is very unlike the Musgrave who narrates it. In fact, she is part of the hoax. Musgrave removes herself from the story and puts, in her place, a naïve innocent who seems ill-equipped to succeed in the sophisticated world in which she travels. Her first relationship, for instance, is with a lost luggage handler. She chooses him by default; when she gets off the plane she is too nervous to leave the lost luggage counter. Still later, when clothes designer Sebastian tells her that he "goes both ways" she thinks he means that he is a "unisex designer." To be sure, her naïvete is part of the fun, but we would be very wrong to take it as an indication of Musgrave's own perspective; the character is the vehicle for Musgrave's irony, not Musgrave herself.

We can easily fall into the trap of equating the two though, because Musgrave both erases her presence from the story and disguises her controlling hand. The relationships within the article all seem to be written and directed by the men within them. It is *they* who decide on location and setting — a deserted Indian village, a 15th century castle. They describe the characters too. When Sebastian calls himself a "spic-and-span sort of person," for instance, Musgrave cleans his castle. And when Hank calls her an incompetent, she becomes one. Even worse than losing control over the relationship however, is Musgrave's inability to extricate herself from it. When her friends tell her that there is something "unwholesome about a relationship with a man who suggested [she] have every part of her body surgically removed and replaced with a new one," Musgrave does no more than record the comment.

Lest we... ities of Mu... minded of... a mate, the... Stephen R... determine... relations... choice, the... quish her... Stephen R... own husb... confuse th... of the aut... But if M... the article... writing it... illusion th... distinction... the living... we remem... we can str... After all... men who... ducing th... to categor... place — "I... The answe... ing about... azine (an... text of *G... reinforces... of male-f... Musgrave... pages of t... the ornam... though, M... plaything... ion mode... men in M... something... of the art... Lost Luga... she wrote... Loss o... problem... Musgrave... that these... but types... the all-A... formian. E... for *failing... study foc... were Ma... virgins u... mother a... would ab... But it... contrived... "Ulysses"... encounte... "Adam"... ing eye... found thi... "Paddy"... ous kind... the faint... have acc... one mus... having a... could go... these me... Musgrave... They are...**

Critics dubbed this author of ten books of poetry, two novels and two children's books, the "tormented sea witch with 'Medusa-like hair' who explores sexuality at the primal level of bone hurt"

approach to the problem of personal identity and not having much success in finding it." However, what Adachi did not notice in *Cocktails at the Mausoleum* (1985), Musgrave's most recent collection of poetry, was at the back of the book. There, in a section entitled "Notes on Poems," Musgrave was beginning to discover the potential of nonfiction as a vehicle for exploring the very issues that (as Adachi quite rightly pointed out) had defeated her in the earlier poems and novels.

"Notes on Poems" marks a significant shift in the emphasis, as well as the genre, of Musgrave's writing: with them, she moves from text to context. Since "Notes" Musgrave has concentrated not so much on the subject (and in all Musgrave's work, she is the subject) but rather on the way it can be written and read, presented and perceived. "I have written notes on many of these poems," she writes at the beginning of this section, "in the way that I might introduce them at a poetry reading: this gives them a context, I feel, without attempting to explain them away."

One result of such recontextualization on Musgrave's part is the multiplication of referents for the first-person singular. "I" comes to signify all of (i) Musgrave the author, (ii) Musgrave the subject, (iii) Musgrave the reader, (iv) Musgrave the author of readings of her own work, (v) Musgrave the subject of readings of her own work, (vi) Musgrave the reader of readings of her own work, and so on. The paradox, of course, is that by reinserting her presence in her work, by "personalizing" it, Musgrave serves only to further imprison the "I" within various layers of discourse (as the diagrams above are intended to illustrate).

But not for long. Musgrave, as that title "Great Musgrave" suggests, is something of an escape artist. Like the "great Houdini" before her, she teases and thrills her audience not with the process of her imprisonment (the intricate system of narrative frames I have outlined, more than a



Lest we overlook the submissive qualities of Musgrave's heroine, we are reminded of them with her final choice in a mate, the imprisoned bank robber, Stephen Reid. Here, the relationship is determined in a very real way by the regulations of the penal system. With this last choice, then, Musgrave seems to relinquish her control completely. And, since Stephen Reid is the name of Musgrave's own husband, we might be tempted to confuse the character's situation with that of the author.

But if Musgrave buries her control in the article, she exercises her control by writing it. Musgrave's powerlessness is an illusion that fools us only if we ignore the distinction between author and character, the living self and the created subject. If we remember that distinction, however, we can strip away Musgrave's disguise. After all, what better way to deflate the men who have controlled her than by reducing their tyranny to concise prose? Or to categorize them according to date and place — "Ireland, 1972," "Panama, 1982?" The answer, of course, is Musgrave's writing about them in a women's fashion magazine (an irony that is lost within the context of *Great Musgrave*), a format that reinforces our sense of power imbalances of male-female relations. Woman's role in Musgrave's article, and on the glossy pages of the fashion magazine is limited to the ornamental. By writing the article, though, Musgrave makes these men her playthings. She tries them on as the fashion models do clothes. To be sure, the men in Musgrave's stories become objects, something she anticipates in the language of the article itself. "I went straight to the Lost Luggage counter, and stayed there," she writes. "His name was Ulysses."

Loss of identity, in other words, is a problem for the men in the story, not for Musgrave herself. In fact, it becomes clear that these men are not real people at all, but types. Take Hank, for instance. He's the all-American boy. "Hank was a Californian. His father gave him a sports car for failing Grade 12, and he went on to study football at college. His brothers were Marines and his sisters would be virgins until they married. He loved his mother as much as apple pie; his mother would *always* be a virgin."

But it is not just the names that are contrived, so too are the scenarios. "Ulysses" is the hero in a story about the encounter between two "searchers." "Adam" frustrates Musgrave with his roving eye. His previous wife, Eve, must have found this to be a problem as well. "Paddy" is the hero in a story about various kinds of madness; and surely we hear the faint reference to padded cells. (To have access to another level of the irony one must know the colloquialisms about having an "Irish paddy," or bad temper.) I could go on, but I think the point is clear: these men have power only in so far as Musgrave chooses to give them power. They are her fictional playthings.

The final irony, however, is that "getting" Musgrave's point is a dubious privilege. Once we realize that her voice is posed, and that she toys with the men who people her article, we must also realize that she is toying with us as well. In particular, we cannot ignore that these anecdotes are fictionalized enactments of the dreams upon which fashion magazines base their sales — dreams of glamour, wealth and romance. The article's byline is particularly telling: "Some were dangerous. None were ordinary. The men who loved Susan Musgrave in their fashion led to the one beyond anyone's reach but hers." As we read the article, though, we find that Musgrave pokes fun at these hollow aspirations. She tells us that a bank robber — in jail — is her dream man. Mythic characters — Ulysses, Adam, the all-American boy, and earl-to-be — all fall short of the mark. And the bank robber is surely symbolic of someone who aspired to a life of wealth and excitement but now, as a prisoner in the story, and as a writer in real life, he has inevitably lowered his standard of living and his financial expectations.

This article is a series of put-ons, in other words. First, Musgrave suggests that she will reveal her past life and loves; instead, she distorts them. Next, she describes herself as a victim of youth and idealism, dominated by the men in her life; but really she reduces them in print. Finally, she promises to write of adventure, glamour and romance, only to reject the values that make these things so attractive. What this article reveals to us are our own expectations as readers and as dreamers. Certainly, we do not get a clear and reliable portrait of Musgrave emerging from her work. She is hidden, after all, disguised by the past she created for herself and clothed in the garb of the fashion magazine female. Herein lies Musgrave's great escape. ♦

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GREG M. NIELSEN

Adventure Culture: Notes on the Origin of the Social Imaginary

The Ideology of Adventure: Studies In Modern Consciousness 1100 – 1750

by Michael Nerlich
translated by Ruth Crowley
with a preface by
Wlad Godzich

Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987,
two volumes, 426 pp.

Studies in culture have witnessed steady growth over the last two decades. For many, the ways of investigating and writing about culture have changed. Semiotics, deconstruction and emerging feminist and ecologist critiques of science are pressing traditional disciplines to reconsider their axioms and rejuvenate their historical foundations. Still, even in the most innovative of the new approaches wherein the interdisciplinary purview is at its maximum, some of the older questions about the concept of culture return: questions of difference, of structure, of praxis and of universalism are certainly not new. We could argue that contemporary debates about the nature of culture follow a controversy already established in the classical sociologies of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel. Each of these theorists might argue that for a society to exist it must first have an imaginary representation of itself, a set of signs produced by actors and reproduced through institutions and the symbolic order that they provide. For a host of philosophical and political reasons, however, Marx differs from the others regarding the explanation of the transformation of the imaginary and the social. For Marx, the first critical sociologist, change is about praxis, about the overcoming of the constraints of the synchronic structure or layers of dom-