

Aha. Okay. Cool.
Yum Yum. Yummy.

Meredith Quartermain, *Recipes From the Red Planet*
(Toronto: Book Thug)



Brian Marley

In his review of Johan de Wit's *Gero Nimo* in GHR Vol. 1, No. 15, Keith Jebb makes a useful distinction:

The book is prose, with similarities to what is sometimes called “poet’s prose” as opposed to the prose poem.

One of the things (one of many) that’s interesting about Meredith Quartermain’s *Recipes From the Red Planet*, is that it’s not always easy to tell into which category her work falls. It’s prose all right, and often there are strong narrative elements, but ‘Gadzooks’, which begins

Um. Hmm. Attaboy. Ah. Uh-oh. Oops. How Odd. Lordy. What a corker. What a match. What an incredible show. Oh phooey. Oh pooh and tut. How ridiculous. Gee whiz. Hmm. Uh-huh. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Uh-huh. What a coincidence that she met him there.

requires the reader to do some work, fleshing out the narrative from a few clues hidden within a plethora of exclamations, all of which

are being uttered by someone in response to a story s/he is being told. But the narrative elements don't quite add up, the story isn't straightforward. Or perhaps there's more than one story. We hear of a coincidental meeting, a gun (luckily empty), something that appallingly took 12 hours (a siege? labour?), there's a raised-eyebrow aside about the amazing elasticity of the body (childbirth?), a woman is said to have left with her baby (a breakup with the man wielding the gun, the baby's father?), the idiocy of playing around with a saw is mentioned, there's an accidental (but perhaps predictable: idiots abound in fiction as in life) amputation (oops-a-daisy), followed by the phrase "What a gas with the smoothiacs and the Cyborginis" (now where did that come from?), followed by something negative about a barbecue, an unnecessary apology to do with pink underwear (whu?), and a comment about the status of said apology. "What a bleep bleep bamboozler," declares the respondent, having heard all this. How true. But who would have thought it? Quartermain would. Indeed has. She provides the ingredients – some; by no means all; in fact hardly any – and it's the reader's job to cook up a likely story.

What could easily get overlooked in this quest for a coherent narrative is the key role played by the exclamations themselves. The dance of the syllables, the belly-bumping vowels and sheer musicality of the prose, the extravagant range of exclamations (as signposted by the title of the piece – the delightfully archaic 'Gadzooks'), the sequences of short, darting phrases, the respondent's attentive noises ("Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Hmm.") – all contribute to the rich texture and supple rhythmic play of the piece.

Of the 60 micro-fictions in *Recipes From the Red Planet*, only one stretches to a third page. Brevity is all. Despite which, none of the stories feels like it's making a headlong dash (pants on fire) to the final period (a duck pond situated nearby). This demonstrates a masterly sense of pace and the know-how to give each sentence – and each part of it, if necessary – room to breathe. And line by line, it's almost impossible to predict what will happen next. Even some of the thematically less complex stories – such as 'Invention 26', which explores several madly inventive but highly unlikely uses for the Chrysler building – constantly confound expectations.

And what of 'My Characters', thematically straightforward but absurdly complex, which defies any attempt at a detailed synopsis? It begins

My sidekick muscles my henchman, whose hunter suspects my penitent who rescues my liar and his nephew, the prime minister, yet woos my cousin's worshipper and betrays his road buddy, her ex-dentist and the worshipper's daughter who cheated their boss in the hockey pool.

and, 13 lines later, brilliantly concludes

My karate teacher whips a side heel-kick my post-ersatz quack narrator fails to duck.

Amidst the hallucinatory entries and exits of characters, their dubious relationships and combative engagements, an italicised single line – “*I don't find it the least bit crowded in here?*” – crops up twice. On the first occasion, halfway through the story, it feels like an act of authorial self-assurance, a nerve-steadier. But when it recurs as the penultimate sentence, after yet more skirmishes between even more characters who furiously engage with each other to no discernible good, it feels edged with hysteria, the cry of a claustrophobe verging on meltdown. To have conveyed that emotional shift without explanation or signposting is a remarkable achievement.

For fear of outstaying my welcome, I'll forego the pleasure of outlining the 57 stories of *Recipes From the Red Planet* not touched upon. Brevity is, after all, all. Anyway, I'm sure you get the gist – it's a fabulous book.