
It's not often that the *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada* reviews fiction but Thomas Wharton's *Salamander* has the distinction of not only being a novel with books and printing as its focus, but also a Canadian novel. It was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award in 2001. His 1995 novel, *Icefields*, was widely praised and was the winner in the Caribbean and Canada section of the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book.

"I restore life from death" is an early printers' motto that begins this strange novel. In its jacket blurb it claims that the central image is the salamander of the title, although far more obvious is the recurring image of the book. It is a story about stories. The book, the printed word, and things associated with them — real and metaphorical — pepper the stories. It is a book of riddles, a set of puzzles. It is a novel about obsession and love and not least love and obsession for books. It is a quest book: the quest for the infinite book, a book without end or even beginning, a book that poses a riddle without answering it.

The story begins in 1759 in the midst of Wolfe's effort to take Quebec. It ends there too, though these Canadian aspects to the novel seem more than a little forced and feel like tokenism because the dozen or so, as it were, Canadian pages are little more than a flimsy frame, or perhaps in the circumstances cover is a better word.

In a bookshop is a scene of utter devastation where two men browse through the few books that remain on the shelves after a raid:

Books without covers. Covers without books. Books still smouldering, books reduced to mounds of cold, wet ash. Shredded, riddled and bisected books. Books with spines bent and snapped, one transfixed by a jagged black arrow of shrapnel. In one dark corner lies the multi-volume set of an outdated atlas, fused into a single charred mass. The gold lettering on the spines has somehow survived the fire and glows eerily from the shadows.

There is talk of booksellers and bookselling: do they read the books they sell? There are books not read, books read and re-read, books yet to be read, books that you can open anywhere, even to the last page, and find yourself at the beginning of the story. The puzzles within the novel are sometimes very complex. There is a castle that is a labyrinth, a three-dimensional riddle. Within is a library with a system of hidden tracks, chains and pulleys driven by
water and steam so that bookcases can migrate, sink into walls and disappear behind sliding panels. The book itself can be a puzzle, hollowed out to contain—what else?—another book. At other times the riddles are simpler, the kind once collected by young ladies in autograph albums: “Light am I, yet strong enough to carry a man away. Small am I, yet within me multitudes sleep, waiting to be awakened. Silent am I, yet my words cross great distances and never falter.” Questions about books are raised, discussed, answered and dismissed. The hard realities of books—papyrus scrolls, parchment codices, paper, type, printing presses, folding and cutting, binding, copyright, footnotes, manuscripts, printed texts, writers, readers, archives and libraries—are all considered, in addition to the ideal, infinite book.

In the no-man’s-land, or perhaps just nowhere, between Bohemia and Hungary, an eighteenth-century printer, the book’s central character, Nicholas Flood, is given the task of producing this infinite book, the book that encapsulates all others—a form and content responsibility. As in all good quests he sets out on a global tour collecting not only ideas about how to make the physical book but also collecting stories. Stories are woven within stories. Philosophical problems arise about the nature of the physical book he will produce—how to bind a book without a beginning or end, how the text might spill out of its covers over the walls and far away, how to control something that is not finite, printed words not fixed on the page but free to be arranged at the reader’s whim.

Flood’s task is to produce the all-embracing book. Wharton’s novel is both the story of what Flood does and also an exemplification of what such a volume might be. There is realism, surrealism, magic and fantasy. One of Flood’s experiments is a book of mirrors where reflective paper makes the words reproduce each other and thus repeat the text endlessly. Books without pages and books without print are also considered though, as one character says, you cannot expect people to read a book of blank pages. Nonetheless the concept of a book of nothing is explored; reading—not the text—is what matters. Elsewhere there are more tangible books: “printed in the ink of the squid on pale green seaweed paper and bound in cured sharkskin”; supernatural ink made from ground oak-galls; Finest Tortoise, the most expensive paper in the world, a blend of crushed hummingbird-egg shells, dragonfly wings, and the inner lining of wasp nests; the next best thing, Breath-That-Folds; an encyclopedia in eleven thousand volumes; and a book made of jade. At times it all
becomes just too clever. At one point Flood tries to print on papyrus with elusive ink. The result is a seemingly blank page until they notice a small speck near the bottom of the page: “At first they thought it was an eyelash or something that had fallen on the sheet just before printing. – It’s a comma, Flood said, closing one eye and peering closely at the speck. A Griffo, or a Jenson, I think.” Again, Pica the heroine – yes, Pica – plunges into a printing press and, deep within its metal, she reaches the well of stories. But the novel is not all as unbearably self-conscious as this.

There is a lot of dialogue and some good narrative accounts, sometimes blurred together in stream-of-consciousness sequences. The landscape is at times real, at other times dream-like and shifting. Sometimes the book feels like history: at other times it’s nothing more than a fairy tale. Time sometimes stops or stands still; occasionally it moves backwards. At certain points it all became too much and I began to feel that Wharton was trying too hard. At these times it seemed best to forget about plot – character was a concept I’d long since thrown out of the window – and, accepting the novel on its own constantly changing terms, I actually began to be caught up in its strangeness and extravagance, and recalling what had happened when mattered less. If I had to choose a favourite character it would be Ludwig, the china robot employed as an assistant in the print shop. Crafted at Meissen in blanc de Chine porcelain with bronze joints, Ludwig can walk, dance a minuet, fight with a sword, drink a glass of wine, and write a few words with a quill pen. He can also talk, in a manner of speaking, and has more than a little soul it seemed to me. He is said to be temperamental. He comes to a sticky end in a pool of ink, his eternal smile split by a hairline crack from forehead to chin. His shell later comes in useful as a disguise, a wind-up messenger with a real person inside, but the flesh-and-blood Ludwig is less interesting than the automaton that is not averse to having its china chin tickled even if it’s just as happy hanging from its hook waiting for the next job.

There is the seemingly inevitable romance and imprisonment followed by release, the discovery of an unknown daughter and a round-the-world search for the lost love, via Venice, Alexandria, China, South Africa, and London. Time passes, as they say in novels. At times it’s all rather and-then-and-then. The travels are all a bit forced and it is really only when they stop in London that place begins to assume any real importance. The London sections are good.
Post-modernists and literary theorists will have a field-day with the novel. Wharton plays with the margins of the text, in and out of the various narratives, bulleted, listed points, pages of chronology, italicised passages, and mirror writing – the format that typesetters read most easily we are told. Meanwhile the minutiae of printing presses and setting type are perhaps decent substitutes for the unities of the traditional novel, though you have to be a dedicated lover of the history of print and print culture to appreciate them. Wharton knows his stuff and has clearly done his research. It would all be insufferable were Wharton not quite a good writer. He'll get better, I'm sure, and I already look forward to his next book.

In the final chapter one of the characters says that it isn't the end of the story but it's a good place to stop. True. Ending a novel is often so much more difficult than beginning it. There's not a lot here that has not been done before by writers from Jonathan Swift via Lewis Carroll to Gabriel Garcia Marquez and in Narnia, Hobbiton and Hogwarts. Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* proves that writing about the process of narrative and reading doesn't always produce a rivetting text or gripping reading. But that it is done at all is noteworthy. As an exercise in getting it all into 372 pages, and being Canadian, *Salamander* is not bad.

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