

Beyond the Foreground: Ann-Marie MacDonald's Prose

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It might be that to label a novel queer is to both stigmatize the art and the orientation. There is also the unwieldy job of creating a responsible set of terms to use in queer literary theory: “heteronormative” likely works better than “straight” or even “heterosexual,” for some homosexual readers can still read heteronormatively, largely because of social and literary training. The binary, too, of heterosexual and homosexual, queer and straight, is obviously problematic. There are those who would categorically denounce such divisive labels, and there are just as many who would argue that until a minority is not other, responsible members of literary communities, writers and readers alike, need to foreground the history of silence, represent the (in)equality, and educate the prejudiced. It is unproductive to force an artist like Ann-Marie MacDonald, one of Canada's accomplished and well-received writers, in one direction. At the same time, it is useful to explore how her two novels function in terms of representation and orientation.

Audience has overwhelmingly, and in rather uniform ways, embraced MacDonald's two novels. MacDonald has been less uniform in her stated ambitions for her writing. At times, it seems she does want readers to appreciate her narratives for being sexually-political; at others she draws attention to their universality. In the latter

case, growth away from prejudices might well occur after reading MacDonald's prose, but it would be less out of a writerly intent. Growth, then, in both reader and writer, practiced in prose and in lives, may occur with or without pointed deliberation. Theorizing about such a growth, however, requires attention to detail and choice. MacDonald has either written queer novels for heteronormative readers, or she has written novels for readers. In either case, there is a specific foreground and background in *Fall on Your Knees* and *The Way the Crow Flies*.

Sara Ahmed used these terms—foreground and background—in her unabashedly binary organized book *Queer Phenomenology*. Since 1998, she has focused her scholarship on power and identity, sometimes with less particularized politics than others, as in *Differences That Matter*, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, and *The Promise of Happiness* and sometimes with the issues of race or sexual orientation at the foreground, as in *Strange Encounters* and in her aforementioned 2006 book, in which she argues that what comes into contact with the body, orients it. Ahmed comfortably uses the words “straight” and “queer” because she conceives of them not as labels but as directions or lines. Compulsory heterosexuality, she explains, straightens, which, in turn, twists queer desire by reading it as deviant. Orientations, as Ahmed sees them, arise out of the proximity of objects and others. Queer phenomenology, for her then, starts with directing attention toward different (although not necessarily gay) objects. Importantly, in terms of developing a responsible vocabulary, Ahmed writes of the features of a landscape: the foreground and background, the “half-glimpsed” objects (4). She explains that by moving the background to the foreground, one queers or slants phenomenology by creating a new angle. Her argument can illuminate a reading practice; what she has to

say about relegation applies smoothly to the ambitions of a writer. To use Ahmed's theory to read MacDonald's novels would be to look at what MacDonald relegates to the background and features in the foreground. MacDonald would have arranged and re-arranged objects to direct the gaze.

Scandal and trauma are in the foreground of MacDonald's novels; love and beauty are in the background. Both *Fall on Your Knees* and *The Way the Crow Flies* are about pedophilia first and homosexuality second. In *Fall on Your Knees*, the patriarch, James Piper, marries a twelve year old, lusts after their first daughter, rapes and impregnates her when he catches her with her female lover, and sexually and physically abuses his second daughter. In *The Way the Crow Flies*, eight year old Madeleine is finger raped by her grade four teacher. MacDonald is vivid in her descriptions of the abuse, rendering it impossible for readers to apathetically disappear the offender as they read traumatizing passages like "He puts his [masturbating] hand around Madeleine's and it must hurt him to rub it like that, the skin pulls away from the top of it like on a turkey neck, the hole is where he pees" (*The Way* 169); "There are her bare legs, and a man's grey sleeve up between them as if she were a puppet" (*The Way* 205). In both, MacDonald foregrounds epic amounts of violence, in combination with other often dramatic topics: inter-racial love, Catholicism, War. *Fall on Your Knees* is a bricolage of cultural traditions of the Gaelic and Lebanese population in early twentieth century, religiously divided Cape Breton. MacDonald's sweeping narrative includes every societal scandal from bootlegging and larceny, to euthanasia and prostitution. *The Way the Crow Flies* is as encompassing; this time MacDonald moves the setting from 1930s New Waterford, Nova Scotia to 1960s Centralia, Ontario, from a dysfunctional, rural

family home to an idyllic military housing community. Within it she couches a murder mystery in the shadows of Nazi war criminality.

MacDonald relentlessly darkens the foreground with scenes of inconceivable horror, like the literally choreographed violence from *Fall on Your Knees*:

In the shed the performance has begun. The upbeat grabs her neck till she's on point, the downbeat thrusts her back against the wall, two eighth-notes of head on wood, knuckles clatter incidentally...The next two bars are like the first, then we're into the second movement, swing your partner from the wall into the workbench, which catches her in the small of the back, grace-note into stumble because she bounces, being young. (262-3)

She sustains the frightened gaze of the reader in *The Way the Crow Flies*, as well, particularly in the concluding scene, when she describes two children raping a third:

Claire giggles, because what game are we playing now?
"Bend over and touch your toes," says Marjorie.
"Um," says Claire, "I don't—I want to play—let's pretend—"
"Are you deaf, little girl?"
Grace gives a delighted shriek and hold tighter to Claire's arm, with both hands.
Claire whimpers, "Can I go home now? Want to come to my house and play?"
Grace pushes Claire down.
"I warned you," says Marjorie.
She tosses Claire's underpants onto Claire's face. Grace jumps onto Claire before she can get up. She hold the underpants stretched over Claire's face and hollers, "Smell your bum!" Shrieking with laughter. (701)

In MacDonald's novels, then, the foreground is indisputable and pervasively traumatic.

In the backgrounds, MacDonald delineates two beautiful, once vulnerable girls. Through their characterization, she appeals to everyone, as she is well aware that people relate to growing up. She writes of Kathleen's and Madeleine's promising childhood, sexually confused adolescence, and early, awkward adulthood. In her youth, Madeleine fantasized about seeing her teacher in a bra, although also, in this sexual awakening period, about slipping her hands around the firm waist of her male motorcycling

neighbour (*The Way* 263, 99-100). In the first novel, Kathleen, too, as an inexperienced teenager, writes in her diary about a rather normative albeit lacklustre sexual encounter:

David said that if he gets killed in the war, he doesn't want to die "never knowing what love is." Translation: He doesn't want to die a virgin. I don't believe he was a virgin, but I was, but that's all taken care of now. I don't want any fella thinking he's got anything special to "teach me" and besides, David is nice. We got a room for two hours. He said we were newlyweds but the man at the desk looked like couldn't care less. Well, I liked the kissing part and the next part. And I didn't mind the rest too much but he seemed more—well, he went to the moon and I stayed here on earth. And he looked totally overcome like a sweet stupid puppy and said, "I love you." I felt like we'd just been to two different moving pictures and didn't know it. (*Fall* 475)

For both Madeleine and Kathleen, their burgeoning sexuality is neither inspiring nor traumatizing. It is, then, in contrast to the foreground, unspectacular.

Gradually, however, MacDonald brings beauty and tenderness to the background.

Kathleen grows into love:

I brushed my ear against her lips. She stayed perfectly still. I kissed her neck between the stiff white collar and her hat and stroked that gentle dip at the base of the skull. She turned slightly and kissed my mouth. So softly. I forgot where we were. That we were anywhere. We just looked at each other...so that's who you are. (*Fall* 523)

Madeleine's love too, although perhaps less lyrical, is equally passionate: "Olivia's kiss is like an electrical gauge. It lets Madeline know that, against all odds, she is in excellent working order" (*The Way* 671).

In contrast to the foreground material, the background contents are wholly positive. MacDonald divides, or to use her term, balances the shadow and light (Cassidy 16). In the foreground of *Fall on your Knees*, for example, she details physical then, specifically, sexual violence:

A roar of blood behind his eyes and he's in the room, yanks the bastard off her with one arm to belt him across the face with the other and

fling him into the wall, his daughter leaps naked at his back because he is going to her lover with the flat of his foot but no, James would never kill a woman. Arms up to cover herself, bleeding mouth, sliding down the wall, Jesus. James tears the spread as though she were in flames, flinger her, a mummy-sack of bones. Then he locks the door and slides the safety chain into place.

“Why, Kathleen?” He is not feeling angry.

She looks up, a blind choking mess. He puts a hand down to her, she takes it, legs shaking badly, onto her feet, clutching the floor-mat for cover.

“Why?”—the back of his hand—“Why?”—his speeding palm—
“Why?”—closed fist.

Her head comes to rest facing forward, already puffing up. He looks at what he has done. He takes her in his arms. She is racked with shame, just wants some clothes, please—

“Shshsh,” he says, kissing her hair, her injured face. It’s his own fault—I should have never let her go far from home—an ecstasy beneath his hands. (549)

The lengthy, foregrounded scene ends with her father impregnating her. In the background, in sharp contrast, Kathleen has love:

And being bold, I put my mouth on hers and this time went inside and told her all the things I’d been longing to. Dark and sweet, the elixir of love is in her mouth: The more I drink, the more I remember all the things we’ve never done. I was a ghost until I touched you...I have only ever stood here under this lamp, against your body, I’ve missed you all my life. (*Fall* 525)

The question then becomes, can MacDonald write the background so persuasively, so necessarily, that she re-orient the reader’s gaze from the horror of the foreground to the beauty of the background? Does she allow the background to creep ahead so that it even overtakes and defeats the foregrounded objects (the pedophile, the victim, the murders)?

According to reviews, she does not. She has enthralled but, it would appear, she has done so with the foreground, not the background. Readers claimed there was no resisting *Fall on Your Knees*; they called it delicious, a knock-out, brilliant, miraculous, wondrous. They pointed to its depth of feeling, its heartbreaking narrative, its graceful and chilling revelations. They wrote of MacDonald’s always precise prose, her

archetypically resonant characters, her wit, her uniqueness of voice, her vivid imagery, her rich postmodern Victorianism (Honnighausen). With the exception of one reviewer who said the novel was gossipy and voyeuristic (Buri 37), the response was wholly positive. The reviews of *The Way the Crow Flies* were as enthusiastic. Although Annabel Lyon called the prose overblown (Gessell 1), most critics celebrated the novel's beauty and passion (Bethune 48), seeing it as inventive and astonishing in its depth and breadth (Velucci 55). They declared MacDonald a moving and masterful storyteller (Honnighausen), suggested she had a Dickensian writerly nerve and a talent for the grotesque (Cassidy 16). These written reviews strike the same positive tone as the televised reviews on Oprah Winfrey: "Something drew me to it;" "We're able to talk about [fictional characters] because of your writing skill;" "I am forever grateful to Ms. MacDonald for writing such an amazing book." All of these responses are quite general. They point to the spectacle in the books and attach generous adjectives to it but say little about the particularities (foreground or background objects). Is the imagery of the rape or the same-sex love what is most vivid? Is the depth and breadth in the violence or the valour?

Reviewers more readily addressed the shadows rather than the light in these novels. The book club members on Oprah Winfrey, a representative cross section of readers, perhaps, articulated both the anxiety and magnetism of the traumatic elements: "As an educator in preventing the sexual abuse and abduction of children—my profession and my passion—I was immediately concerned with the sexual references and overtones [referring to incest]; another reader said, "I felt the book demonstrated a disregard for the value of life. There is no victory, no overcoming, only acquiescence to the banality and

degradation of life.” A final book club member added “I often choose books where the family dynamics are horrifyingly dysfunctional. I’ve come to realize that we all take some measure of comfort in a family situation that is even more frightening than our own.” Although they did not name it as foreground, this set of reviewers chose to focus on the frontal objects rather than the joyous material in the background.

There are a number of reasons they may have limited their comments in such a way. Firstly, trauma is spectacle and spectacle attracts. Secondly, non-heteronormative material is other and can easily stay other because of, to borrow from Adrienne Rich, lies, secrets, and silence. The background in MacDonald’s two novels is about lesbian love and women’s beauty. While reviewers largely denied the substantial presence of these, MacDonald gradually and subtly developed the objects into restored and repositioned bodies.

She had kept readers oriented toward the traumatic foreground so much so that, in all likelihood, they would have been too dizzied to deliberately reposition themselves so that they might be able to peer behind for what might be waiting in renewal. The sexuality of Kathleen and Madeleine, then, because of how MacDonald oriented them, was simply not important. Of course, there are those who would argue, nor should it be: love and its expressions are best left disoriented. There, however, are others who might believe MacDonald’s novels form an important platform to positively feature same sex love. To feature it, is to move it from the background to the foreground, which, ultimately, MacDonald does. With varying degrees of subtlety, she performs this re-angling.

Bringing the backgrounded content to the foreground is a slow but arguably premeditated process for MacDonald. Although she fully gives over the last quarter of both novels to the lesbian characters, she only gradually reveals their orientation. She allows Kathleen to delineate her own selfhood, through diary entries, but she has her initially articulating herself from a heteronormative position: “If she were a boy we would be in love” (*Fall* 497). At this point, if a reader is assuming an orientation for Kathleen, it is a heterosexual one. MacDonald chose a slightly different method of approaching the slow reveal in *The Way the Crow Flies*. She titles Part Four “What Remains” then proceeds with a short philosophical-historical chapter, followed by a chapter on Madeleine’s parents’ strained marriage, two pages on a war criminal, until she finally comes to the main character. Yet, even then, she uses the vague chapter title “After-Three TV” and adds a Lewis Carroll quotation: “Even a joke should have some meaning—and a child’s more important than a joke. I hope” (527). The quotation establishes the topic of the chapter: Madeleine’s identity as an adult, as a comedian. So when MacDonald says “Madeleine is entering her prime” (527) she is not referring to her sexual identity but to her career.

Madeleine’s young sexually ambiguous history falls away in this chapter, however. MacDonald disappears the detail that Madeleine once fantasized about her arms around the neighbour-boy. She shifts the objects, instead, so that the refreshed foreground has same sex love as opposed to unspecified, and by default, heteronormative, love. She describes Aida: “Madeleine’s first grand passion after Miss Lange” (528). She slows the pace again, however, by establishing that this was a passion of the soul rather than a sexual passion, she does so without pomp: she weaves her in as a friend, someone

who showed Madeleine the world of books and politics, someone who worries about health. Twenty pages into the description of Madeleine's thirty-two year old life, Christine draws her a scented bath, with flower petals, then brushes "back a lock of her long wavy hair where the tips were trailing in the water" (561).

Of course, such paced delineation of sexuality can point to a positive appreciation of the wholeness of a person's life: people, women, lesbians, are not, first and foremost, sexual, and MacDonald's particular method of characterizations of Kathleen and Madeleine certainly encourage readers to understand the wholeness of adulthood. Foregrounding same-sex love in the slow way that MacDonald does, serves to promote an understanding of personhood as greater than sex and to sooth potential fears of prejudiced, heteronormative readers: same-sex love crept in but did not accost.

Cleverly, in *The Way the Crow Flies*, MacDonald brings both heterosexual and homosexual relationships to the same demise. Of Madeleine's parents' marriage, MacDonald writes, "What is it to end a love story after forty years? So many nice times. So many remember-whens?" (539) and two pages later she writes similarly about Madeleine and Christine: "The death of desire is a bottomlessly sad thing" (561). Paralleling the romantic relationships in this way universalizes them or removes the perhaps heteronormative tendency to deny the similarities between all relationships, regardless of the genders involved.

As MacDonald cajoles readers to accept, even love and respect, Kathleen and Madeleine, she shows what might be a similar shift in the attitude of her once homophobic characters. Specifically, she positions these key characters embracing the freedom inherent in shifting away from the unhappiness that can come with negative,

heteronormative judgement. For example, she has the same mother who would not sing to her injured daughter, who would not accept her gay daughter into her home, who referred to Madeleine's homosexuality as a lifestyle (542) and said to her "You are sick" (540), eagerly exchange her anger and fear for maturity and love:

Here Mimi pauses to wipe her eyes and Madeleine hands her a box of tissues—"I realize that this young woman I was making up...this sweet girl with the long dark hair, she was my daughter. And that"—Mimi sucks in her breath through the mouth, unlipsticked at this hour—"I already have...a beautiful daughter. (*The Way* 685)

It is of interest that at Madeleine's mother's most unprejudiced moment, she is, without her lipstick, the least stereotypically feminized she has been. MacDonald clearly associates the absence of vanity with liberalism, as in her first novel she characterizes Kathleen's lover Rose, who represents all things good, as having no mirror (511). It is this kind of subtlety in portrayal that points to MacDonald's skill in manipulating foregrounded and backgrounded material to best appeal to tolerance in her readers.

She includes such scenes of dissolution of homophobia in *Fall on Your Knees* as well. A sister to Kathleen says of another, "Maybe you're a Lezzy" (384) but at the story's end, treasures Kathleen's lover's album as representative of family and truth (556). The disbanding of homophobia is in combination with the dismantling of other prejudices. Kathleen moves through both her heteronormatively limited perceptions and racial stereotypes—"I thought coloured people were supposed to have rhythm" (469)—to a self actualized, unfettered, loving adult. Sentimental though it may be, MacDonald ultimately suggests that when a person opens him or herself to community, prejudices crumble: "I have a friend and all wrong feelings are banished, they are not needed!" (*Fall* 406).

These sentiments, however, fall uncomfortably close to disturbing details: Kathleen coveting her father until the moment of rape, for example: “I want to see my Daddy” (*Fall* 461); “I take after my father” (508); “You’re the smartest person I know, except for my father” (512). Perhaps the most challenging to a reader’s reorientation is that, even in the midst of Kathleen’s story, MacDonald weaves objects from the traumatic foreground, now worn to the point that Kathleen’s daughter, begot out of incest, is “happy together at home alone” with their father (441). With these historied, heterosexual though traumatic details is MacDonald merely holding lesbian desire in the foreground for brief, illuminating moments or, worse, is she delineating lesbian sexuality as Judith Roof describes—as being a male derivative, a product of failed incestuous or pedophilic desire for the father or patriarch (203)? Both protagonists accept their lesbian sexual orientation only after men have abused them.

Again, there are multiple reasons MacDonald might have delineated the sexuality of her characters in this way. Abused women who find love (whether same sex or not) need representation. Some women have chosen their sexuality; they too need representation. For heteronormative readers, accepting same sex love may come more easily if they feel they are supporting the characters from victimization to survivorship; in short, perhaps MacDonald knows a larger audience will accept her lesbian characters if they were something else first. The latter is an interesting strategy for it runs the risk of alienating readers who find the suggestion of symptomatic homosexuality irresponsible.

If Ahmed is accurate, then MacDonald orients the reader (Ahmed’s “the body”) by bringing him or her in contact with the object. If the reader is not heteronormatively oriented, MacDonald has had him or her in nearly constant contact with trauma,

heterosexuality, and, in the end, same sex desire as symptom. If the reader is heteronormatively oriented, MacDonald has kept him or her in constant contact with the abuses of society, then re-oriented him or her with relief from violation by bringing him or her into contact with the lesbian body. She queers the reader by directing his or her attention toward different objects, specifically same sex desire. Ironically, even the most heteronormative reader will likely welcome being queered, as the “straight” line to the originally foregrounded material felt entirely oppressive. The reader that was already queerly oriented, however—he or she whose attention is on different objects than those most commonly foregrounded—has to suffer through the violation of straight access to what MacDonald characterizes as the abusive, heterosexual objects before requeering to the different objects: the objects which are beautiful but only after victimization.

MacDonald has not used Ahmed’s terminology to describe how she imagines the orientation of her readers, but she has articulated at least two of her reception ideals. Both include a respect for audience, a respect, she says, she had developed in her work in theatre (Cassidy 16). She seems to understand that to reach the broadest audience, an Oprah Winfrey Book Club audience, for example, she would have to understand a heteronormatively oriented audience. Unlike Jonathan Franzen,¹ MacDonald welcomed the recognition the American media mogul provided her. When Oprah Winfrey asked her her idea of readers, what she wanted readers to do with her book, MacDonald responded “To own it. To feel like it was your story. To forget that anybody wrote it.” Such a general ambition for her audience has nothing to do with the sexual orientation of

¹ In 2001, Franzen declined the offer for his novel *The Corrections* to be part of the Oprah Winfrey Book Club, but in 2010, of course, allowed *Freedom* to join the list.

her readers, but does say something about MacDonald's belief that she could disappear herself, her intentions, so that audience could take ownership.

Such a disappearing would enable readers to believe that they were orienting themselves to objects in the novels by bringing themselves into contact with the prose details. If they, then, for example, noticed they were more focused on the objects of trauma than of sexuality, and later on the objects of love and less on violence, they would take responsibility for changing the angle of their gaze. Ownership of such a re-angling might, in turn, empower the reader to believe he or she chose his or her response, without authorial manipulation. So, for example, if he or she came to feel less prejudice toward lesbian desire, he or she might believe the reorientation to be self-willed and therefore more active or even permanent.

If the idea of reader initiated orientation led to such a form of political change, MacDonald's more passive understanding of her ambitions for audience, namely her avoidance of specifically establishing that she would like them to orient themselves queerly, would achieve a similar outcome to a more active understanding of audience. That is, both passive and active approaches to the responsibilities of reader would have him or her comfortable and supportive of the queered objects in the text. Further, the passive approach might appeal to the largest audience, both queer and heteronormative, with less political confrontation, certainly for the latter demographic.

However, in interviews for Canadian journals for example, as opposed to those for American television, MacDonald expressed a more active or specific understanding of her ambitions for her audience. She used the analogy of wanting to walk into people's houses with a stick and break all of the figurines on their pianos (Cassidy 16). Such an

ambition is in line with Peter Dickinson's, as he expresses it in *Here is Queer*, published only three years after MacDonald's first novel. Dickinson expressed the need to upset writing orthodoxies. While his focus was on the way writers orient objects, MacDonald's, with her piano analogy, is on how to bring her readers into contact with re-oriented objects. According to her tone, it is to do so abruptly, even violently: through breakage. In the analogy, if the home is heteronormativity and the piano and figures are the objects of that particular orientation—views on relationships, sexuality, marriage, domesticity—MacDonald is saying she wants to destroy those objects, those views. Her novels, then, aid in that destruction by villainizing many of the heteronormative objects. Her project would not be queer, however, according to Ahmed's definition, if she then did not replace the broken heteronormative figurines with queer/ different objects. Concluding both novels with the foregrounding of same sex desire is queer.

Despite what she declared in the interview with Oprah Winfrey, her ambition to break figurines seems quite deliberately queer or invested in changing the angle for the unsuspecting audience. Her deliberation reveals itself in her careful crafting, not just of the timing of the scenes but even in her word choice. Many of MacDonald's sentences speak directly to her familiarity with the pervasiveness of heteronormativity. When she has Kathleen saying, "I'm going to be *normal* with her from now on" (*Fall* 494), MacDonald is addressing her character's own heteronormative training. Kathleen is no doubt responding to her confusing but very real feelings for her same sex friend in a way that most of MacDonald's heteronormative readers would. MacDonald's approach to audience here, then, is less like breaking figurines on a piano and more like showing the

similarity between people's figurines before highlighting one that perhaps had been in the background.

She uses similar writing strategies throughout her novels, so that, for example, she does not alienate the heteronormative reader in *Fall On Your Knees* by using a less familiar discourse. To this end, she integrates the word queer only once: "The stew smell mixed with her perfume and made me feel a bit queer" (508). The innocuous placement is new historically responsible, for the novel amounts to being a period piece: the setting is early twentieth century New York. Queer did not mean homosexual. In the sentence, the word functions much as it does now: Kathleen felt repositioned. Very subtly then, as MacDonald gently positions readers to turn their gaze to other, less violent objects, such as the love between Kathleen and Rose instead of the abuse between Kathleen and her father, she does so without discomforting them with potentially alienating diction.

MacDonald shifts her language strategy significantly in *The Way the Crow Flies*. She uses words such as lesbian and dyke and this, too, points to a moment in time in queer culture: namely, Toronto, Canada in the 1980s. Historically, her shift in diction is unavoidable, but in terms of effect on her readers, it may alert them to her agenda—one that is more pronounced than the "forget that anyone wrote it" proposition she had suggested to Oprah Winfrey.

Her more obvious attempt at reorienting the reader through both event and language, as she does in *The Way the Crow Flies*, is also in keeping with what might be the less hegemonic status of heteronormativity in the period she was writing out of. A number of things had happened to/ for/ about queer culture in Canada in the years

MacDonald published her novels. Not only had Oprah Winfrey celebrated her novel and Dickinson disseminated his text, Terry Goldie published *In a Queer Country* (2002), television situational comedy *Will and Grace*, featuring a gay lead character, won Emmies (2000+); Canada legalized same-sex marriage (2005);² the United Church made posters asking Canadians to question if God hates someone if he or she is gay (2006).

The position of MacDonald's novels within and without of queer culture—recognizing that queer culture is, in itself, a limiting construct built of tenuous foregrounded and backgrounded objects—depends largely on the interpretation of the nature of the contact between writer, reader, and material. It is not enough, is perhaps even unjust, to argue that MacDonald's novels are queer. At the same time, it is equally problematic to disappear the orientation of the objects in her novels, if that orientation helps to broaden political initiatives that prose writers are capable of and society needs: initiatives toward tolerance. MacDonald's is a literature that can challenge heteronormativity, that can encourage a different dialogue or tone through varying of degrees of subtlety but, in the case of *Fall on Your Knees* and *The Way the Crow Flies*, they do so with violence to the heteronormative, often foregrounded, material.

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² In March 2011, newspapers reported that Americans (55%), according to polls, are finally in favour of same-sex marriage. Gay marriage is legal in only 5 states.

Beyond the Foreground: Ann-Marie MacDonald's Prose

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