

BOOKS

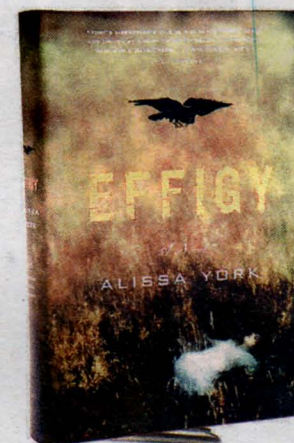
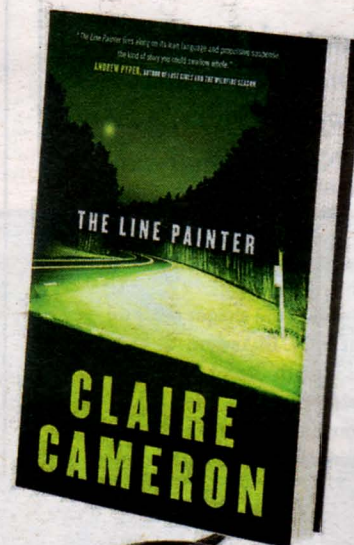
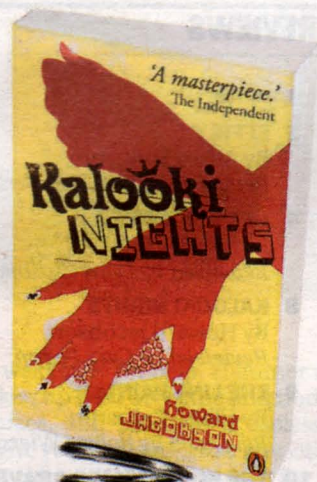
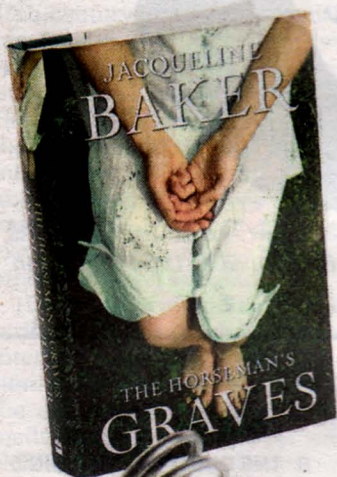
SPRING FICTION

JOY FIELDING, JACQUELINE BAKER,
ANDRÉ ACIMAN & SEVEN OTHERS

**GIRLS AND SEX:
THROUGH THE
LOOKING GLASS**

**A BOY'S LIFE CUT SHORT
BY THE HOLOCAUST**

POETRY IN EMOTION



FICTION

Human taxidermy

Effigy

By Alissa York
Random House Canada,
429 pages, \$32.95

REVIEWED BY CANDACE FERTILE

Exquisite detail in Alissa York's historical novel *Effigy* ensures that readers are transported to 19th-century Utah, specifically the ranch of a polygamous Mormon family, where seething tensions do not remain below the surface. Headed by the detestable Erastus, the Hammer family is made up of four wives and several children, and each member lives in bleak emotional isolation, attempting to eke out tiny bits of pleasure in an otherwise harsh existence.

Hammer's wives follow their prescribed roles, but each has her own interests. The first wife, Ursula, runs the household. Her son, Lal, the eldest child, is a disappointment to both parents; the other children, all from the second wife, Ruth, are in the background. Ruth's love in life is her silkworms, which she carefully tends while submitting to her religion and her husband regarding the creation of children. The third wife, with the bizarre name of Thankful, is a former actress and, once married to Erastus, uses her skills to excite and satisfy him sexually, much to Ursula's disgust.

The novel tends to focus on the fourth wife, Dorrie, a teenager whose skill at taxidermy is what propels Erastus into marriage with her. Dorrie is gifted at preserving bodies, and York describes the particulars of skinning and reforming the animals in what for some readers will likely be a gruesome fashion. ("The skulls have taken hours. She's proceeded in order of descending size — adult male through female runt — scooping out brains, severing optic nerves, prying eyeballs out whole. Careful work, but nothing compared to removing all traces of facial flesh.")

Erastus wants the animals he kills to be mounted, a monument to his hunting skills. But Erastus is going blind, and for some time he has employed a Paiute guide named Tracker, who is the sharpshooter. The Hammer family is a mass of secrets, hypocrisy and envy, which moves inexorably toward disaster.

York uses a variety of techniques to move the story both forward and backward, filling in how the ranch becomes a Petri dish of human misery. All the characters come from grim backgrounds. If they ever had love, it is lost, and most of them never experience it. Women are commodities with their bodies and skills for sale: "After a dozen years of managing a household alone, Ursu-



ILLUSTRATION BY NEAL CRESSWELL FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

la was ready for help. Hammer was taken up with breeding and trading horses, and Lal was as useless at eight years of age as at any other. Housemaids were few and far between on the frontier, and those who were about commanded too great a price. Wives were cheaper and easier to control — or so Ursula imagined at the time. Besides, was it not a man's sacred duty to people Zion with his seed?"

But women's lives are not worse than men's. In this world, everyone suffers. Both Tracker and the new hand, Bendy, have awful pasts. Tracker has lost his brother, his wife and his people. Bendy has lost his mother and his father is a brutal man who deposits the small child in a rooming house while he goes off in search of gold. As difficult as life is on the Hammer ranch, it's better than the realistic alternatives for the characters. At least they have food and shelter. But mere survival is not enough for any human being, and the Hammer ranch demonstrates how people need some joy in their lives — and definitely some sense of community and worth.

In this novel, Mormonism offers some sense of belonging, which is its main attraction. York skillfully shows the power of belief, especially when it is connected to need. But belonging to a religion or even to a family does not necessarily result in an emotional bond, and York suggests that that in the Hammer fami-

“The Hammer family is a mass of secrets, hypocrisy and envy, which moves inexorably toward disaster.”

ly, basic human kindness and love are impossible given the individual wars being waged in this fractured world where pride governs behaviour more than anything else.

Apart from the sense of historical reality in daily life and the specialties of taxidermy and silkworms, York gives glimpses into the story of the Mormons, and the key historical event she uses is the 1857 Mountain Meadows Massacre — in which Mormon militia and Paiutes killed as many as 140 Arkansas emigrants at a stopover along the Old Spanish Trail in southwestern Utah — strong evidence of human beings' prejudice and inhumanity. And she manages to bring together the various strands of narrative, letters and dreams in a compelling conclusion.

In her first novel, *Mercy*, York made use of the techniques of historical fiction, and with this novel, she excels in the genre. *Effigy* is an apt title, given the representations of human beings and animals, in particular a family of wolves (symbolic of the Hammer family) whose bodies Dorrie labours to preserve. The ultimate irony is that while the characters live in their painful loneliness, they cannot help but affect those around them with enormous consequences. *Effigy* explores the nature of what it is to be human.

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