

2024 Jan Michalski Prize for Literature
Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands [*Environnement toxique*]
Laudatio for Kate Beaton
Written by Jonathan Coe, member of the Jury

Dear Kate Beaton, members of the jury,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

A great book, a great work of literature, will take readers outside of themselves. It will take us to a place we would never otherwise go; perhaps to a place we would not even wish to visit, of our own accord. A great piece of storytelling can consist entirely of language, or it can take the form of language combined with other elements, such as music or images. Above all, a great novel can help us to navigate the complexity and the contradictions of human experience, by reminding us that our individual lives can never really be lived outside the larger, more universal crises of our time, be they political or environmental. Kate Beaton's masterly graphic novel entitled *Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands* does all of these things.

The Oil Sands of Alberta, one of the three prairie provinces of Western Canada, are not a place that many of us are ever likely to see with our own eyes. This is the place where most of Canada's extensive deposits of bitumen are located. Crude bitumen is, as I understand it, a very thick and viscous form of oil. Because of this viscosity, oil from the oil sands is the most expensive kind to produce. It is also one of the most polluting kinds. Profitable extraction and processing of the Canadian oil sands creates carbon emissions which are 31% higher than from conventional oil, and oil sands production has been the largest contributor to the increase in Canada's greenhouse gas emissions.

What kinds of places are they, the production facilities where vast quantities of this viscous, sticky deposit – deemed so essential to our modern way of life – are extracted and processed? The illustrations in Kate Beaton's novel introduce us to a huge, oppressive industrial environment, filled with lowering warehouses and factory buildings on an inhuman scale, and where the living spaces look Spartan and unwelcoming, more like an army barracks than a place for workers to live together in comfort. Isolated from the nearby towns, the employees huddle together here beneath skies which seem to be forever slate-grey, in a world which appears exhausting, dehumanising - and, it must be emphasised, almost exclusively masculine.

According to her autobiographical novel, Kate Beaton was drawn to the Albertan oil sands soon after graduating from university, with the specific aim of paying off her student loan as quickly as possible. She worked there for two years, almost two decades ago. Sometimes it can take an artist a long time to process her experience and turn it into art, particularly art as complex and expansive as this novel is. *Ducks* is a narrative of more than four hundred pages, encompassing many thousands of hand-drawn images. These images range from large-scale, panoramic drawings of industrial landscapes, spread over two pages, to intimate, square boxes, sometimes as many as nine to the page, in which the emphasis is on the characters' faces and the words they are exchanging with each other. These more miniaturist passages are among the most affecting in the book, thank to Kate Beaton's perfect ear for dialogue – a novelist's ear for dialogue, I would say – and her exceptional ability, as an illustrator, to convey a character's emotion by the simplest stroke of her pen.

Her narrative is not propulsive, exactly. There is no plot. Instead we have snippets, vignettes, small fragments of life in the camps. We meet the handful of female workers, who seek a kind of refuge in each other's company, and we meet the male workers, who range from the friendly to the aggressive, from the gentle to the predatory. At the heart of the book is a dark episode of sexual violence, rendered with clarity but also with tact, bringing the same lightness of touch that Kate Beaton shows throughout the book: a lightness which, nevertheless, does not make the episode any less powerful or upsetting. There is trauma here, at the very centre of things. And there is another kind of trauma, too, experienced not by the women in the book but by the very landscape upon which this massive and in many ways ruthless industry has imposed itself. It's no accident that the French translators of the novel gave it the title *Environnement Toxique*.

And so there is trauma, yes, but it does not overwhelm our story. As Kate Beaton says in her eloquent postscript, she met many decent people working in these camps, men as well as women, and she is generous enough as an artist, and truthful enough as an observer of human nature, to make us understand that humanity comes in as many different shades of grey as she uses in her marvellous drawings. The novel does not portray a world of heroes and villains but a world in which ordinary working people are, for the most part, doing their best to earn a living and to forge a life for themselves in extremely challenging circumstances.

We might call to mind, at this point, a famous declaration by the English writer George Eliot. A writer who – as some of you will know – spent part of her life at no great distance from here, in the city of Geneva, where she lived for a while on the rue de la Pelisserie. In Chapter Seventeen of her novel *Adam Bede*, George Eliot breaks off from telling her story to give a passionate defence of her aesthetic as a writer. To champion the idea that the novelist's role is to portray nothing more nor less than everyday life; the struggles and triumphs of unexceptional people; to celebrate the quotidian:

In this world [George Eliot wrote] there are so many of these ordinary people, who have no picturesque sentimental wretchedness! It is so needful we should remember their existence, else we may happen to leave them quite out of our religion and philosophy and frame lofty theories which only fit a world of extremes. Therefore, let Art always remind us of them; let us always have artists ready to give the loving pains of a life to the faithful representing of commonplace things ...

There are few prophets in the world; few sublimely beautiful women; few heroes. I can't afford to give all my love and reverence to such rarities: I want a great deal of those feelings for my everyday fellow-men, especially for the few in the foreground of the great multitude, whose faces I know, whose hands I touch ...

It is these people whose movements of goodness you should be able to admire—for whom you should cherish all possible hopes, all possible patience. And so I am content to tell my simple story, without trying to make things seem better than they were; dreading nothing, indeed, but falsity, which, in spite of one's best efforts, there is reason to dread.

There is no falsity in Kate Beaton's work, in her faithful - and diligent - representing of commonplace things. She is an entirely truthful observer of the world around her, and has an extraordinary gift for putting that truth on the page, in words as well as in drawings. With this book, she has produced a

great graphic novel, certainly. A great novel, in fact – we don't really need that qualifying adjective. And, perhaps most important of all, this a great piece of popular art: a work which can be savoured and enjoyed by any reader, from any background. A work which will bring pleasure, and provoke thought, in all those who enter its pages, showing that complexity, originality and nuance can be the defining qualities of an artwork which at the same time is entirely accessible. I hope and believe my fellow judges will agree with me when I say that it's this quality, above all, which makes *Ducks*, by Kate Beaton, a worthy winner of the Jan Michalski Prize for Literature.