

2024 Jan Michalski Prize for Literature  
*Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands* [*Environnement toxique*]  
Speech by Kate Beaton, laureate

Hello, everyone.

First I must give my thanks. I can't imagine that this is an easy task for any member of the jury. I have been on book juries myself, and it is an impossible task to hold a number of amazing, worthy and completely different works up against one another, and pick one, even though in the end that is what you have to do.

Thank you to Vera Michalski-Hoffmann, Jonathan Coe, Kapka Kassabova, Andrea Marcolongo, Valérie Mréjen, Gonçalo M. Tavares and Sjón for your time and consideration. I'd like to recognize my fellow finalists, Mathieu Bezezi and Irene Solà, who deserve the accolades today as much as I do, and whose company I am privileged to be a part of. Their work is exemplary, and both regionally distinct with a voice that speaks far beyond both geographical boundaries and place in time. I can certainly feel a kinship with that.

I wanted to say more than thank you as well. I would like to talk a bit about what I hope a prize like this means to works like mine.

I grew up in the same village I live in today. It's very small, very rural, on an island at the far eastern shore of Canada. There is no choice to go in any direction you please, for to the east, north and west there is only the wide-open ocean. This is how Cape Breton juts out into the Atlantic – almost entirely. You can leave the island by one bridge to the south, onto the peninsula of mainland Nova Scotia, but it is a long time even then before you hit what may be considered the solid mass of the North American continent.

It is not a rich place, rather, what comes to mind when people think of Cape Breton is beautiful landscapes coupled with economic hardship. I say all this to convey a sense of obscurity to you, that is very familiar to me. No matter where I go in life, this will always be the view that shaped my understanding of my place in the world. Quaint, poor and far away, that was us.

So it is with both gratitude and great surprise that I accept the Jan Michalski Prize for Literature. I read those words “an outstanding work of world literature” with astonishment when I received the news. What's more, *Ducks*, the book we are here for, is about the loneliest and most isolated time in my life. If I were to tell the younger, vulnerable, remote version of myself who lived in the work camps of an mine in Northern Alberta that an account of her time in the oil sands would be worth notice in global literature, she would not know how to parse that information. So far removed from her daily reality as to not make sense at all.

I put it this way because I think it matters, not just that I was surprised, but why. When you are working class, when you are a nobody in an enormous industry, when you are quaint, poor, and far away, you never expect your story to matter to anyone.

I'm so glad this book resonated with a larger audience. I see the common ground we cover across great distances when we talk about class and labour and industry.

We all live in a society that exploits workers and ruins the environment. The power mechanisms and systematic social order that affect even the most obscure, remote worker have analogues worldwide. One story is never alone. I have heard from people of all kinds of backgrounds that *Ducks* reminded them of their own experience. People with experience in industrial work. Experience with extreme gender disparity. Remote, or socially isolated work. Migrant work. We have these

everywhere, and if there is one thing I want to see, it is that the attention to my singular story only unearths more and more stories like it.

But *Ducks* is also not only my story. I tried very hard to include as many different experiences that I witnessed in the oil sands as I could. In many ways, I tried for my character to be the guide for the reader through multiple stories and viewpoints. I wanted to tell a story much bigger than myself. This is a book about many things, but above all, I would say it is about capitalism.

We are all used to the way things are. For most of us – here and back home anyway – Capitalism is just the way the world works. A social ladder that we are supposed to be able to climb. If things are comfortable and routine enough, if life is predictable and money is ok, then we probably don't think too much about it. But what do you do if you are from a place that is not comfortable, not predictable, and most of all, not wealthy? Opportunity was never equal. Modernization does not benefit everyone. For many, there simply is no ladder.

I am from one of those places. My home is like many others across the world. Once, people lived on subsistence farming and fishing, but that has been unviable since a long time with nothing to replace it. The jobs nearby were industrial ones that boomed generations ago, but the industries were eventually euthanized because they were more profitably performed elsewhere, or because industry devoured so much that the resource was extinguished, or because the industry just collapsed. What remains in their place is a disheartening milieu that follows the regular paces we know as deindustrialization. The pattern happens everywhere. Decline. Job losses, out-migration, a decreased tax base that must enforce cuts to local public service, shuttering of non-profits, degradation of local landscape and buildings, diminished health care, diminished health. With all these come an increase in substance abuse, depression, gendered violence, and crime. To be on the losing end of a capitalist society is to have your hope, your sense of worth, your community integrity made less, even though you never had the power to stop it. The advice we were given was to leave. But where do you go, when you have nothing, and you feel that you are nothing? What will happen to you? When the coffin closes on a regional industry, there are always people left inside.

*Ducks* is often exploring this losing end. It is as I said, about many things at once. It is a commentary on gender, corporate and government power, labour, money, how we treat each other in isolation, mental health, drug abuse, sexual violence, Indigenous rights, environmental concerns, and class. All this just out of my own memories of what happened.

In the oil sands, I worked with a lot of people from my island who used to work in coal mines, the steel plant, or the pulp mill. I worked with a lot of people from the province of Newfoundland, where ten years earlier, the largest layoff in Canadian history happened and 40,000 people lost their livelihoods overnight. And I worked with a lot of people like myself, who had no money, and no options at home, and felt like this was their only future. The companies we worked for re-formed our daily lives both at work and off work to suit maximized profits. A study by the University of Alberta showed that camp workers in the oil sands faced worse general mental health, more work-related stress, and higher incidences of diagnosed long-term health conditions and use of mental health services than found in the general population. Or an increase in mental health issues with no help at all. More women reported being harassed and discriminated against at work. More men reported thoughts and instances of self harm. Watching – and experiencing – these struggles up close is how *Ducks* came to be. It never left my mind. Nor did witnessing up close the environmental destruction wrought by extraction industries. You may hail a taxi ride in a city

and not think about oil and gas as you travel through the day-to-day of modern life, but it is harder to deny the hard truth when the shovels are tearing the boreal forest up just outside your window, and the Indigenous communities nearby are being poisoned by the toxic runoff in the water.

When I left the oil sands, I realized that most people had no idea what human life was like in one of the largest industries in our country. Who were the people in the gears of the economic engine, the prosperity that everyone thrived on during the oil boom? Alberta is the only Canadian province without Provincial Sales Tax, largely because of wealth from the oil sands. In 2006, in the middle of the time of *Ducks*, the Alberta government sent out a "Prosperity Bonus" to every resident in the province, totalling \$1.4 billion of money for nothing. The oil industry creates jobs nation-wide. Some people might have a bumper sticker, shirts or hats with "I <3 Alberta oil" or "I <3 Canadian Oil and Gas" but what, aside from money, were they talking about? Other people might despise and protest the oil sands for the massive machinery of pollution that it undoubtedly is, but all the same, whose working lives were they protesting along with that industry? What did anyone know about them? Those stories were invisible, replaced by a stereotype image of a one dimensional hard-hatted blue-collar worker who lacks any complexity or interiority. Or an image with no humans at all, just large dump trucks driving around at the behest of Shell Oil and other powerful corporations.

*Ducks* is merely an eyewitness account. Nothing is simple, I have no answer to the problems of capitalism. But I did not want the people I knew to be invisible. By and large, that is what people like me were, and still are. I think *Ducks* captured people's attention because there are so few working class narratives like it to be found. After all, working class people are far less likely than wealthier people to wield their own image for the general public to assess. Class is a neglected aspect of diversity in literature, even though it is so often entwined with different intersecting identities. When working class characters appear in books and tv, they are often presented via the withering gaze of the middle class. They are written by people who have never lived that life, but who have been afforded the opportunity to become writers and artists in greater numbers than poor people ever could. The Arts belong largely to the affluent. These are the people who produce the media we consume, the stories we look at, read and listen to. the bulk of what we absorb and accept as our own culture over years. The dominant narrative.

That my account of industrial labour, after coming out of an impoverished area, has received the honour of this prize is humbling and validating for me. I feel solidarity with anyone who sees themselves in my book. We all wish to be seen. I feel proud when people find themselves enlightened about a world they never knew through my book. But I do not want my book to be an outlier. We need greater representation from the "invisible" workers, we need an appetite for their stories and their perspective. The well-being of humans, human communities, and the natural environment we share all deserve protection. Too often, they don't have it. Capitalism is one of the ultimate models of the phrase "the ends justify the means." How can we make meaningful change without including the voices of those most affected by this?

I hope my book will soon be just one among many, instead of a curious exception. I am so glad for the recognition I am receiving today from the Jan Michalski Foundation. I feel as though it awards not just myself, but the young woman I was who worked in a mine, and lived in a man camp, far away from where anyone was looking. I bring her with me, through the years and over the many miles, to accept this, to be seen, and say thank you.

