

MINUTES  
of the Meeting of  
The Novel Club of Cleveland  
May 6, 2014

Hosts: Leon Cabinet and June Salm

Novel: *A Map of Glass* by Jane Urquart

Papers:

Biographical: Jennie Kaffen

Critical: Ted Sande

The Novel Club of Cleveland met at the home of Leon Cabinet on the evening of Tuesday, May 6, 2014. Members enjoyed the preliminary social gathering with refreshments supplied by Leon and by June Salm. President Cabinet called the meeting to order at 8:20. Treasurer Mary Douthit reported that she will continue to collect dues for next season. The Program Committee is still working on details of next year's calendar, but notes that the November meeting will be held on the first Tuesday, even though that is election day. Minutes of the April meeting were read and accepted.

**Jennie Kaffen presented the biographical paper on Jane Urquart.**

Jane Urquart's work is lyrical, and she is admired for working history into her novels. The Canadian literary establishment treasures her. She was born in 1949, daughter of a mining engineer. Her mother's Irish ancestors arrived in Canada during the potato famine. Thus, her childhood was filled with references to the past in Ireland and to the family's experience of settling in Canada. Jane attended public school through grade 7. She then attended a private high school, and then the University of Guelph. Little of her childhood education dealt with specifically Canadian issues since, as she has remarked, "we were a colony at that time." However, she developed a fascination with the Canadian landscape, which is apparent in her work. Jane married after university, but her husband died in car accident when she was only 24. This loss shaped her writing; she has noted that it "allowed me to remember what it was like to experience such a devastating loss, as my characters do."

Urquart later married a man with four children. In that marriage, while raising a large family of children she still made time to write every day. Her work so far includes five acclaimed novels, a collection of short fiction, and four books of poetry. She started writing as a poet. In addition to her poetry and fiction, she has written a biography of Lucy Maude Montgomery, author of the *Anne of Green Gables* books. She also does editing work. She presently lives with her husband in Ontario.

### **Ted Sande presented the critical paper.**

Ted began with the observation that a map may be thought of as a device allowing us to relate to what it depicts. In those terms, this novel gives a combination of quantitative and qualitative data and invites us to relate to them through the mixture of history and culture.

The story starts by describing the death of Andrew Woodman as he wanders disoriented in the snow. We later learn that Andrew was a teacher dedicated to geography of the area. His death had apparently gone unnoticed until his frozen corpse was discovered by Jerome, a landscape artist who gives up his project under the stress of the discovery. When Jerome's discovery is reported in the newspaper, it is seen there by Sylvia Bradley, wife of Dr. Malcolm Bradley and a sufferer of autism, Asperger's syndrome, or some related disorder. Sylvia then tells Malcolm of her long (though interrupted) love affair with Andrew. Malcolm thinks she couldn't really have had such a relationship because she has never shown the ability to form normal relationships with other people.

Shortly, Sylvia leaves Malcolm to go to the city to find Jerome and talk to him about Andrew. She brings along a "tactile map" that she is creating for her blind friend Julia. Over the next few days, Sylvia develops a relationship with Jerome and his girlfriend Mira. Jerome gains insights on his own parents' relationship as he hears about Sylvia's life

Urquhart then inserts a long historical section about past generations of Woodmans. This insertion establishes historical/geographical context for the overall story, as well as establishing in the novel a presence of the theory of entropy—the tendency of all things to decay.

The novel begins with a question regarding the inability of maps to really show the things they describe, since they can't convey growth and change. The work of the quoted artist, Smithson, informs the novel because his pieces are living examples of how entropy works. Jerome refers to Smithson's "Map of Glass" in response to part of Sylvia's description of the burning of the Woodman mansion. Smithson's fascination with entropy seems to have influenced Jerome, and thus the novel. Jerome's work was cut short by the trauma of finding Andrew—who also was called an "historical geographer." Though Urquhart doesn't give a bibliography, it is interesting to note that there were in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century several books dealing with the topic of historical geography. History is linked "inseparably" to key concepts of geography, according to curriculum materials on both issues. Space, time, and the entropic process are interwoven in Sylvia's telling of the story of her affair and the history of Andrew Woodman's family.

If it is true that in the modern world, most believe we don't know our own destiny, then perhaps we make our own "map of glass" for moving through the space-time continuum. In Andrew Woodman's case, as his memory fades he loses his map. Sylvia, in contrast, remains attached to her map. She speculates on her way home at the end of the novel about what might have happened if she and Andrew had had a son. At this stage, she may have a new source for further development of her map.

Discussion began with several readers expressing interest in reading more of Urquart's work.

On the issue of the Woodman genealogy segment of the book, the question was raised whether it was essential to the novel as written, or whether it might have worked better as a second book. Opinions varied, but consensus developed that the present-day and past-time stories are essentially intertwined, even if the historical segment may be somewhat overdone. The intertwining gives the novel a very slow pace, which may be initially frustrating but ultimately captivating—and then surprising, when the closing of the present-day story shows only four days have passed. The stories of Sylvia, of Jerome and Mira, and of the earlier Woodmans' rape of the land (as economic exploitation and/or normal advance of entropy) have led some critics to say the book is overloaded, while others praise the deft interweaving of threads.

Further discussion explored the relationships among characters in the present-day plot. These include the relation of Malcolm to Sylvia (is he supportive or exploitative?) and of Andrew to Sylvia (is it therapeutic, or possibly only a fantasy she has created?), and of Sylvia to her blind friend Julia, for whom she is creating a tactile map. Readers agreed that there is an interesting range of relationships, with some puzzling features about the interaction of different elements of Sylvia's world.

Turning to the issue of the Canadian identity of this novel, Ted and others commented on contrasts between Canada and the United States in the absence of pressure on newcomers to "Canadianize." Where the U.S. still operates in a "melting pot" frame of mind, Canada shows a different mindset by having a Minister of Multi-Culturalism. Where the United States literary hero tends to follow Oedipus or Huckleberry Finn, running away from past authority to new identity, a Canadian hero more resembles Telemachus--a loyal son honoring its heritage and refusing to rise up against its parent country.

Additionally, it was noted that a "typical American" novel is likely to have a higher-impact plot and a stronger climax, whereas this one has a rather easy-going plot and a fade-out ending. Program Committee members remarked in response to a question from the floor that the "Canadian Novel" theme was not meant to focus on what might be "typically" Canadian, but rather just to give

some attention to authors who are prominent in Canada but not so well known in our country.

Looking forward to next month's meeting, readers were reminded that we will have the traditional balloting for favorite and "least favorite" novels of the season, so discussion of the final novel (*Indian Summer* by William Dean Howells) will be somewhat less extensive than usual.