



DEGRASSI NATION

Michele Byers' *Growing Up Degrassi: Television, Identity and Youth Cultures* (Sumach Press) is a collection of 16 essays contributed by both scholars and fans of *Degrassi Junior High*, *Degrassi High*, and *Degrassi: The Next Generation*. For 25 years *Degrassi* has graced television sets across the nation, and this book explores the successes and failures the show has encountered along the way. Although rewarded for its contribution to Canadian culture, the show is more often critiqued for airing controversial topics. For over a decade, it has addressed subjects that many other series would never discuss—AIDS, abortion and drug use—leading to petitions to get *Degrassi* off the air.

Growing Up Degrassi is a remarkable effort. Containing a variety of voices, its aim is to show the role that the series has played in shaping the identity of Canadian youth. It achieves this aim, and goes beyond.

The introduction, "Creating a Classic in Television History," zooms in on the impact that *Degrassi* has had on the teenage demographic, as author Mary Jane Miller reminisces on the long way that the series has come. From *The Kids of Degrassi Street* in 1979, to *Degrassi Junior High* in the '80s, followed by *Degrassi High* and now *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, the series has earned the title "revolutionary" for being the first ever aired to specifically target the teenage demographic in Canada.

Though there were creative differences between the producers Kit Hood and Linda Shuyler, writer Yan Moore and CTV's American funding partners—which the book's editor, Byers, addresses in her essay, "Revisiting Teenage Truths"—the goal of the show was always to speak to teenagers in a voice that was authentically their own. Byers then takes a closer look at the subject of national identity and explores the factors that distinguish the series as being "Canadian" rather than "American."

Drugs, sex and money in *Degrassi* are all confronted in Bettina Spencer's essay, "Everybody Wants Something." Spencer critiques US counterpart shows, such as *Saved by the Bell* and *Beverly Hills 90210*, for lacking a realistic approach to teenage issues. *Degrassi*, on the other hand, is so realistic it almost seems unscripted.

At first glance the book appears bland—a textbook-like cover and a lack of photographs throughout the publication. Nonetheless, the contents prove that the old adage is true about not rushing to judgement. *Growing Up Degrassi* consists of powerful and edifying compositions, touching on topics that can only be understood by true *Degrassi* devotees.

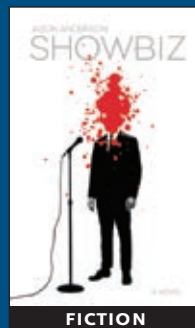
—Jodi-Ann Smith



Iron-on Constellations by Emily Pohl-Weary (Tightrope Books)

A fitting 54 pages long, *Iron-on Constellations* is a collection of sweet, sometimes stark poems. A DIY tour de force as editor of hip lit zine *Kiss Machine* and also the *Girls Who Bite Back: Witches, Mutants,*

Slayers and Freaks anthology, author Emily Pohl-Weary this time manages to locate herself and her work in a city landscape, Toronto specifically, without falling into grandeurs of "urban-chic." She takes on topics of art, home, hospitalization and isolation from a familiar but fresh perspective. The characters in Pohl-Weary's poetry are confrontational without being childish or abrasive (even those who are definitively angst-ridden teenagers). Her fascination with the cold and concrete is juxtaposed gently against skies, greens and warmth. Her poems mix classic poetics with an unusual muse: the wallflowers and underbellies of her hometown, which she paints so realistically, then picks the paint off of again. These poems prove that there is something undeniably poetic in the specific ("The neighbour wears bruises to the grocery / We meet sometimes, near the broccoli"). Bringing the observant, sub-cultural, anti-hero voice Pohl-Weary is known for into her poetry debut, readers should expect nothing less: "we can always wear steel-toed boots under the sheets / explode together like paint bombs / whittle away our time, picking at walls and armies." —Tara-Michelle Ziniuk



Showbiz by Jason Anderson (ECW Press)

For those who can't handle the truth, there are alternate universes much like our own except the names have been changed to protect the innocent. In his debut novel, Toronto writer Jason Anderson protects his ass in recounting one more "fictional" version of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. His tale is told from the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern perspective of bit player, comic Jimmy Wynn (modelled on once-famous JFK impersonator Vaughn Meader), whose entanglement in things conspiratorial resulted in his virtual disappearance from mass consciousness in the present day. Wynn's story is divulged by the nascent investigative talents of one Nathan Grant, a failing, Canadian freelance writer in New York desperate for a feature article. In a cross-country search for Wynn/Meader, fiction intermingles with fact as Grant encounters a Shaggs-like band, a Roger Corman-esque movie producer and an "extreme" magician who bears a strong resemblance to David "Above the Below" Blaine. Strangely, the only real celebrity in the novel is Lenny Bruce, though this one is still alive and tormenting nurses in an old folks' home. Despite the author's reliance on hoary old reality, Anderson demonstrates a powerful imagination and a low-key sense of humour in his "factional" tale of celebrity, failure and the dangers in remembering things better left forgotten. —Terence Dick