Michael Decter

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We acknowledge the assistance of the OMDC Magazine Fund, an initiative of Ontario Media Development Corporation.

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For poetry submission guidelines, please see <reviewcanada.ca>.

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Periodical Fund of the Department of Canadian Heritage.

We acknowledge the assistance of the OMDC Magazine Fund, an initiative of Ontario Media Development Corporation.

The Literary Review of Canada is indexed in the IBZ and is distributed by Disticor and Magazines Canada.

The LRC is published 10 times a year by the Literary Review of Canada Inc.

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Founded in 1991 by P.A. Dutil

LRC design concept by Jackie Young/INK

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ISSN 1188-7494

The Literary Review of Canada is indexed in the Canadian Literature Periodicals Index and the Canadian Index and is distributed by Distributor and Magazines Canada.

Vol. 22, No. 7 • September 2014

reviewcanada.ca
Harry Karlinsky’s playful second novel teases the reader.

J.C. Sutcliffe

The Stonehenge Letters
Harry Karlinsky
Coach House Books
253 pages, softcover
ISBN 9781552452943

Harry Karlinsky likes a good mystery. In his first book, The Evolution of Inanimate Objects: The Life and Collected Works of Thomas Darwin (1857–1879), he wrote about the youngest son of Charles, who was unknown to history until Karlinsky, clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of British Columbia, discovered both his existence and the reason for his being hidden: severe mental delusions that caused him to apply his father’s theory of evolution to cutlery. So convinced was Thomas that cutlery was subject to natural selection that he submitted papers about his theories to the science journal Nature. He ended his days in an asylum.

Now in his new book, The Stonehenge Letters, Karlinsky has uncovered another puzzle. In Sweden to research why Sigmund Freud never won the Nobel Prize despite multiple nominations, he soon learns that someone else has already tracked down the answer. However, the Nobel archive yields other treasures: the knäppskalle (or cragpot) file—unsolicited nominations for the prizes, many from individuals apparently suffering from psychiatric illness. Thinking he might fruitfully pursue a psychopathological investigation into their symptoms, Karlinsky begins a systematic study of the file, only to have his interest snagged by five letters with two things in common: all but one are written by Nobel laureates, and all relate to solving the mystery of Stonehenge.

In fact, everything I have written so far is only partly true. Both books are actually novels, linked by their exploration of the boundary between stories and fact in terms psychiatric, historical, and literary. The narrator of The Stonehenge Letters—not in fact Karlinsky, but an unnamed retired psychiatrist—is intrigued by the link between the Nobel Prize cragpot and Stonehenge. Reading through the file and correspondence, he learns that Alfred Nobel himself connected the two. After sketching out Alfred’s disappointments in love and his propensity to fall for unsuitable women, Karlinsky invents a further love affair. Needing land in Wiltshire for sale—1,300 acres that happen to include the ancient monument of Stonehenge. He is shown around by the intelligent and highly educated Florence Aントrus, daughter-in-law of the owner. Florence loves the stones, both sentimentally and intellectually (the fictional Florence writes a book called A Sentimental and Practical Guide to Stonehenge, as did the real Florence), and Nobel falls for her.

This fictional relationship is intriguing: Freud would find plenty to say about Karlinsky’s desire to pair up Nobel with a more suitable woman, albeit at an unreachable distance (Florence is married and safely across the sea; they never meet again although they correspond). As our narrator reads through the letters between the pair, it becomes clear that the five cragpot letters are related to a deathbed promise Alfred made to Florence to offer a prize to the person who could solve the puzzle of Stonehenge.

In the first half of the novel Karlinsky combines biographical details, legal and executory processes, and quotations from Freud (some of which, Karlinsky points out in the acknowledgements, were actually said by other people) to create a convincing, and surprisingly interesting, second narrative frame. The submissions themselves, all from Nobel laureates, form the next level of the story. Ivan Pavlov is first to respond, with perhaps the most unconventional solution: determine the age of Stonehenge by means of earthworms. Kipling’s appearance is orchestrated, with his vague submission to the committee comprising a wonderfully wide-eyed pastiche of Puck of Pook’s Hill:

“Was it the Druids who brought the stones here to Amnemby?” asked Dan. “Was it their magic that did it?”

“It must have been magic,” said Puck, “magic more powerful and black than a thousand Merlins could conjure. But I was a wee thing then and did not see it done. Not even I know the story of the stones.”

Next up is Theodore Roosevelt, who requests funding for an expedition to demonstrate both the origin and the transportation method of the stones, followed by Marie Curie, whose proposal involves using the newly discovered technique of radiometric dating.

The fifth solution, proposed by Norman Lockyer (coincidentally, also the founder of Nature. Coincidence? Freud would not have believed that for a minute), is instantly filed in the knäppskalle without even making it to the prize committee’s deliberations. Lockyer’s outlandish proposal? That Stonehenge was a sun temple built to observe the sunrise on the longest day of the year, and therefore be dated by measuring how far the point of the midsummer sunrise has moved since it was built.

Like The Evolution of Inanimate Objects, The Stonehenge Letters is a work of fiction made to look like a stylish retelling of historical fact. Not so much metatext as meta-fake-fiction (fake-metaction?), this novel charms with its games and connections. To the unininitiated, the topic or the prose might sound dense, but Karlinsky’s writing, already lively, makes good use of quirky tangential detail: “After a second Lancasther [car] proved as unreliable as the first, Kipling bought a German–built Daimler, which he named Gunhilda.”

The footnote to this sentence turns out to be a list of the names of all Kipling’s other cars. Elsewhere Karlinsky displays one of his flashes of humour:

It was decided that any unanswered question concerning Stonehenge would be viewed as a legitimate “mystery” for solution.:

—Who built Stonehenge?
—When was Stonehenge built?
—How was Stonehenge built?
—Why was Stonehenge built?
—What did Stonehenge represent?

There was one awkward moment. When Sjöberg [one of the three committee members] suggested that Where Stonehenge was built might also be considered a “mystery,” it was initially assumed he was either joking or introducing a nuanced consideration to the discussion. Regrettably, neither assumption would prove correct.

In The Evolution of Inanimate Objects, the “joke” is that by intelligently applying perfectly logical reasoning to the evolution of cutlery, Thomas Darwin demonstrates the full extent of his mental delusions. His theory is so absurd yet deeply satisfying the reader almost wishes it could be true. The newer novel works less coherently as its own self-contained world since the “solutions” to the mystery of Stonehenge feel too plausible, and are slightly undermined by the inclusion of Lockyer’s theory, which he had actually proposed. Ultimately the second narrative frame—the correspondence, the biographical details, and the setting up and judging of the prize—rather than the solutions to the mystery is the best part of this whimsical and intelligent novel.

It is almost a shame to try to work out the seams between fact and fiction; there is an undeniable pleasure in spotting the connections Karlinsky quietly inserts, as well as a few his subconscious slips in (the correspondence between Karlinsky and the Nobel-awarding Karolinska Institutet is intriguing), but there is also a joy in indulging one’s ignorance and deliberately not investigating the precise borders of fact, fiction and no man’s land. A novel lives far beyond its pages, the influence of this work is spreading far beyond its author’s ability to contain it. Each time I tried, while writing this review, to check whether certain connections were real or fictional, the top search-engine results never changed: links to The Stonehenge Letters filled the first page. Now that’s meta.