Rachel Yoder, *Nightbitch*. Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2021. Pp. 256. Hardcover, $27.00.

Rachel Yoder's debut novel draws you in with its skillful sleight of hand when its contemporary, self-conscious, ironic idiom suddenly turns surreal. *Nightbitch*, with a nod to Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, is about transformations, both physical and psychic. Early in the novel, Yoder's protagonist—a highly educated, sophisticated artist who is also the stay-at-home mother of a two-year boy—abruptly begins to turn into a dog. As with much gothic, speculative, or horror fiction, it holds a funhouse mirror up to contemporary psyche and society in order that readers might recognize a critique that both entertains and illuminates:

> When she had referred to herself as Nightbitch, she meant it as a good-natured self-deprecating joke—because that's the sort of lady she was, a good sport, able to poke fun at herself, definitely not uptight, not wound really tight, not so freakishly tight that she couldn't see the humor in a light-hearted not-meant-as-an-insult situation—but in the days following this new naming she found the patch of coarse black hair sprouting from the base of her neck. . . .
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> I think I'm turning into a dog, she said to her husband when he arrived home after a week away for work. He laughed and she didn't.
>
> She had hoped he wouldn't laugh…

Despite her self-reflexive, ironic tone and studied nonchalance, the protagonist is caught in a maternal socio-economic trap that hasn't changed nearly as rapidly as its technological and educational trappings have. Contemporary mothers may be educated, they may possess technical devices and specialized skills, but the elemental experiences of giving birth, of parenting and developing a child, of creating a positive family environment, continue to require large amounts of time and money, as well as the contributions of multiple committed parties. Individual achievement, the standard by which the mother has been educated and otherwise evaluated, and which she has internalized as a young professional, simply doesn't apply. The artist-mother makes less than her husband, so it is her job that is expendable. Her husband's work requires him to travel, and so to live an ostensibly single life in a hotel except for weekends. How can one collaborate to make a family under such conditions?

Leaving the art world and its tight community of values and judgements, the protagonist finds the unremunerated category of "stay at home Mom" distasteful because it lacks the discrimination and nuance so abundant in her art world experience. She scorns the idea of joining other mothers through the library's "Book Babies"

program, yet she is desperate for companionship. She seems to be alienated from her own mother as well, perhaps because that mother gave up her own ambitions to become an opera singer to assume the role of a dutiful mother in a community that did not encourage the development of special talents—described but never named as Mennonite. Two years of mothering and sleep deprivation have caught up with the protagonist when she reaches around to the back of her neck to discover a patch of dog hair growing there.

Like "The Yellow Wallpaper," the gothic short story first published by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *The New England Magazine* in 1892, *Nightbitch* explores the isolation of the mother who is expected to dedicate herself solely to the raising of a child. Both protagonists are unnamed, and share the secrets of their transformations with the reader. But whereas the unnamed female protagonist of *The Yellow Wallpaper* descends into madness as she recognizes her trapped condition, defeating her husband's condescending "rest cure," the unnamed protagonist of *Nightbitch* undergoes a dual metamorphosis. As she explores her "Nightbitch self," the protagonist embarks on an ambitious project of re-integration, embracing her anger, physicality, and intuition through her experiences in a dog's life shared with her son.

In *Nightbitch,* the project of reclamation and reintegration involves overcoming internalized value judgements, and the protagonist's recognition of the need to create her own community. The vehicle for this transformative project is the embracing of her own doggy self, the discovery of the dog-selves of the other mothers around her, and the mentoring of two wise women, one of whom she finds in a library book, the other from her childhood memories. The doggy world that they first discover through play develops into a lens through which they begin to perceive the dog in others. Once several of the "Book Babies" mothers appear to the protagonist and her son as dogs, she—and eventually her son—join the "pack." Thus the alpha blond morphs into a golden retriever who smells of strawberry shampoo, and the protagonist becomes involved in the alpha's multi-level marketing scheme to sell herbs to other mothers in search of some meaning, connection, and income. How the protagonist reclaims her art, integrates it into her life and family, and uses it to engage a community is breathtaking and a bit bloody. Readers of Mennonite literature will be intrigued to find that while the protagonist has rejected the community of her youth, she appears to find value in parts of its longer, less restrictive past. But fair warning: the fussy family cat does not fare well. Nor do bunnies.

This novel is hilarious, when it isn't absolutely terrifying. The child starts sleeping through the night only when Nightbitch orders

him to sleep in the dog kennel she has purchased. When the child is fast asleep in the kennel, Nightbitch can roam the yard and surrounding woods, chasing down and snapping the necks of unsuspecting rabbits. Throughout the novel, Yoder builds tension between the protagonist's increasingly reckless and joyous nighttime adventures and her husband's dawning awareness of her transformation. A critical moment arrives when the husband demands an explanation for an overnight disappearance, and the protagonist does not back down or apologize. Instead, she faces him directly and boldly claims her new animal identity, even when in human mother form. "She was Nightbitch," Yoder writes, "and she was fucking amazing." I will let readers enjoy the novel's startling resolution on their own, but will say that it is a credit to Yoder that she has found not only a wildly entertaining vehicle for exploring the joys and rage of modern motherhood, but also a possible means of escape from a trap that many readers will recognize as their own.

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Carla Funk, *Mennonite Valley Girl.* Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2021. Pp. 280. Hardcover, $32.95.

As I read *Mennonite Valley Girl* by Carla Funk, I was vividly reminded of her lyrical writing style, her particularly effective use of metaphor, and her ability to conflate love with honesty as she describes people close to her. I say "reminded" because I read her first memoir, *every little scrap and wonder,* a few years ago, and was impressed then with the ease with which the stories emanated from the pages. Surely it is unusual for any writer to pen two memoirs, much less one as young as Funk, and that within two years of each other; however, as the first one focuses on her childhood and this one explores her teenage years, the two books taken together can be understood as telling the story of a single life.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, themes similar to those in her earlier book emerge in this one: gendered roles, small town life, religion, and her Mennonite roots. But these themes take on new meaning as Funk now describes a different stage of her life. There are also new themes explored in this memoir. Body image and the yearning to fit in, for example, appropriately infuse a number of the chapters, as Funk artfully depicts adolescence with its awkward and hormonally charged properties.