Salve Creek

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By

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ABSTRACT

The novel *Salve Creek* tells the story of Xavier Creed, a young man murdered in a small industry town in contemporary Northern Alberta. When Xavier goes missing the night of a large bush party, no one notices his absence. Having spoken for months about leaving for Edmonton, his friends and even his own mother assume that he took the Greyhound.

Told through the close-third person narration of three main characters—Penelope, Dean, and Westley—the novel takes place over the duration of a year. With the discovery of Xavier’s remains, the narrative moves forwards and backwards in time, pushing against perceptions, as well as both the reader and characters’ understanding of events. *Salve Creek* is a non-linear narrative told primarily in fragments to reflect the shattered status quo of both town and characters.

Penelope, who felt a desire bordering on obsession for Xavier, is particularly affected by his death and finds herself unable to sleep. Her dreams bring her closer to Xavier and repeatedly to the neighbours’ empty field. Dean, who met Penelope the night of the bush party, struggles to communicate his attraction to her. As the novel progresses, his frustration takes increasingly violent shapes. Westley, ten years older than both Dean and Penelope, is a stranger to them both and his actions affect them in ways they cannot see or understand. *Salve Creek* is a rural noir, written in the new gothic style.
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I would also like to thank my family for their encouragement and Justin Bedi for always asking the tough questions.
Artist Statement

*Salve Creek* is a novel that explores small-town horror and mystery motifs. Told through the close third-person narration of three main characters—Penelope, Dean, and Westley—the novel tells the story of Xavier Creed, a young man from an industry town in Northern Alberta who has gone missing. The narrative spans the space of a year in a fractured and fragmented narrative, moving through themes of inertia, contamination, and time. It is a rural noir, written in the new gothic style and opens with the discovery of Xavier’s body.

When I wrote *Salve Creek*, I was influenced most strongly by three novels—*Mountains of the Moon* (2013) by I.J Kay, *Even the Dogs* (2010) by Jon McGregor, and *Wild Dogs* (2004) by Helen Humphries, three works which make use of a non-linear structure. Each writer uses the fragment form in a different way, but all helped me to navigate concepts of time and character. By reading their works carefully, I was able to further develop my own sense of disjointed structure and the way in which I needed to proceed. I would place *Salve Creek* within contemporary fragmented fiction. I also read several gothic works, for their handling of suspense and mystery. Some of these include *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier (2003) and *Jezebel* (2010) by Irene Nemirovsky.

From the beginning, I knew the type of story I needed to tell; however, the plot was still unclear. As a writer, I’m not plot driven and I go by instinct rather than outline. What I knew when I began the thesis, was that Penelope’s ‘almost-lover’ and her obsession, Xavier Creed, was already dead. In the opening scene, she and Dean are unaware of this, until the RCMP roll down to meet them. As I continued to write *Salve Creek*, that first scene took on greater significance. I returned to it several times and through each re-imagining, it gained weight, becoming a ‘Fall from Grace’ moment, a present-future spoiling with the past. *Salve Creek* began as a single image: two people, walking down the length of a gravel road, in bright sunlight, not touching. The opening scene is a metaphor for Dean and Penelope’s relationship throughout the duration of the novel: two people hyper aware of each other, with a shadow stretching out before them.

Although I set out to write a crime fiction or a novel with a mystery at the heart of it, I really struggled against calling *Salve Creek* a mystery and quickly turned away from horror. While there are strong elements from the mystery genre in *Salve Creek*, such as the discovery of Xavier’s body, the writing became much more poetic. It is a literary fiction, beginning and ending with death. I wasn’t interested in telling the story of solving a murder; I wanted to be more realistic in my portrayal of events. This attraction towards realism is the reason that the RCMP play a minor and shadowy role. Since the story is told through three main characters, none of whom are in positions of authority, too many dealings with the RCMP would seem false to the feeling and reality I’m portraying.

I began writing in a more new gothic style than the piece needed. The new gothic “refers less to a precise form or style, or to specific content, and more to a tenebrous, alien sensitivity to the energies of the unconscious” (Sonik and Henderson, 1) Originally,
my plan or faint plot outline was for the town itself to undergo a series of physical changes, as well as my main characters, as a reaction to the murder. I still like that idea; however in the long form of a novel it wasn’t sustainable and it didn’t fit with either the hyper-realm of the setting, or the increasing strangeness of the general tone and atmosphere of my writing.

The dichotomy of past and present is one of the most important themes in *Salve Creek*, and was one of the most difficult structural decisions I worked with. Time is fluid and may mean different things to many people. The mechanics of this struggle are represented in the transitions between the past and present tense. In the novel, I use a dual narrative: the past working along side and affecting the present. This is not what some people might consider to be a traditional flashback, with a character physically triggered into a memory. Rather, I write whole fragments in the past tense, suggesting that both Dean and Penelope existed before Xavier’s murder, and that these memories are still part of the consistent narrative of the present.

Beyond the technical structure, is the greater theme of time itself; how is it measured? If the past is always with us, can we truly have a linear life?

Since a linear structure was a false rendering of the story, I wrote in a fragmentary style instead, moving with ease between at first, two main characters: Dean and Penelope. Westley appeared almost by accident, in a dream-like fragment that suited neither Dean nor Penelope. Writing in a fragmentary style allowed for a truthful portrayal of the ‘dysfunctional narrative.’ In *Salve Creek*, the violence, which has occurred in the past, affects every character in the present and for most of the novel, the killer’s identity is unknown. My mentor, author Leona Theis, described the fragmented narrative as a spiral, circling downward towards the ending. In a way, all fragmented narratives are mysteries, with each fragment revealing a little more information. I found Leona’s definition incredibly helpful when writing *Salve Creek*. My instinct was to revisit moments and places, as if on a map, and to constantly gnaw away at their significance. Charles Baxter says that “[o]ne of the signs of a dysfunctional narrative is that we cannot leave it behind, and we cannot put it to rest, because it does not, finally give us the action we need to enclose it.” (7) For my own work, I’ve interpreted this understanding of the dysfunctional narrative to mean that, with Xavier’s death a crucial understanding of the town and each person in it has been altered. For the characters and especially Penelope, to find meaning, the story of Xavier’s murder must be re-told.

I chose to not include chapters, finding the separation arbitrary and disruptive to the narrative. Instead, I’ve separated *Salve Creek* into sections divided by the seasons. Although there is a lot of splitting and separating that occurs within the novel itself, I preferred that the narrative be largely undisrupted, much like the life of the town. This continual motion is meant to have the effect of inertia and restlessness.

The novel begins with a prologue, acting as a kind of wide-angle lens, zooming up and over the town. In this very short paragraph *Salve Creek* is divided by a bridge, and a bus completes its loop to Walmart. The prologue gives the reader a sense of the
atmosphere and a hint at what has occurred off-stage. By using this device, the novel proper is able to begin in media res without much exposition.

A deliberate decision I made during the writing of the novel was to not include exact numbers, including ages. By their actions and socio-economic status, it is pretty clear that they in their early-to-mid twenties. However, something that I found interesting was that the older members of my workshop wondered if the characters were still teens. Shuzo Oshimi, creator of an anime called The Flowers of Evil, discusses the concept of adolescence in Vol.3 of his series: “When does adolescence end, I wonder? I think ‘adolescence’ covers that dark period between being an unthinking school grade kid and ‘adulthood,’ when you’ve gained discernment and slipped the chains of self-consciousness.” (Oshimi, 176) The beginning of adolescence is visible through physical changes in puberty, but the end is “harder to see” (176). Oshimi suggests that the end of adolescence and the change in self-consciousness “is something you have to find for yourself.” Reading this description of character and consciousness helped me to understand my own writing. The characters in Salve Creek are still stuck in that ‘dark’ in-between phase.

There are several reasons for their arrested development—Xavier’s murder, place, and their socio-economic status. Living in a town where, on the surface, nothing ever changes has an effect on personal development. Patterns of behavior have been set. To compound this, all three characters have ‘stayed behind’. They haven’t left Salve for extended periods of time, whether to attend post-secondary schooling or work. Without leaving, they cannot gain a deeper perspective. Also, they are all of a lower socio-economic status, and the town is isolated from larger city-centres. This is perhaps why they may seem younger than they are written, particularly to older readers.

Setting plays a large role, not only in the plot, but for characterization as well. The town of Salve in Salve Creek is a mill-town, however in Northern Alberta, most spaces have been occupied by the oil and gas industry. The threat of contamination is ever-present and smell preoccupies all three characters, but especially Dean. Characters are their truest selves when outdoors. I chose to set Salve Creek in Northern Alberta partly for personal reasons—I grew up in the Peace River region and have always wanted to see it represented in fiction. Although the town in my novel is fictional, it is a geographical amalgamation of Peace River, Beaverlodge, and Manning.

Salve Creek isn’t a love story but love operates as a kind of sub-theme. It raises questions. How do we know when we are in love? What if the person we are in love with doesn’t love us back? What if they die? Penelope and Dean could be perfect for each other, if Penelope didn’t love Xavier and hadn’t witnessed his death. In the novel, all three characters change, as does the reader’s perception and understanding of their motivations.

Westley is only written in the present tense. I made this choice to reflect on his involvement in the murder and because of his origin. Since I began Salve Creek as a mystery with elements of horror, Westley was conceptualized to be more of a ‘red-
herring’ character but quickly took on shape and a life of his own. A red-herring can be defined as “something that draws attention away from the matter being discussed or dealt with” (Farlex). In mystery fiction, this is often the character who appears to be the most guilty. Westley became increasingly complicated as the novel progressed and the narrow confines of the red-herring trope were no longer acceptable for his role. I consider him to be a main character, even though he is not featured as prominently in the narrative as Dean and Penelope.

In Salve Creek there are many kinds of separation. First perhaps the most obvious, is the distance between life and death. Xavier is at once cut off from the present of the novel and from physically interacting with any of the characters. His haunting is of the people and the town. Another separation is characters from each other; in Salve Creek, many of the fragments are moments of stillness, where Penelope, Dean, or Westley are alone. And finally there is a constant division between sides: the bridge dividing the town in two, the rural world versus the town itself, and the lines drawn between friendship and relationship.

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