

a lucrative job and nab a “respectable Nigerian husband.” Instead, she gets engaged to a white British man. “Bummi tried to count to ten ... before jumping off her chair,” Evaristo writes. “Carole, she said there is no point getting on in this country if you lose who you really are, you are not English ... you are a Nigerian, first, foremost and last-most.”

Now cue LaTisha, a supervisor who walks through the fruit and produce section of her supermarket like she’s “Chief Fucking Bitch on the prowl.”

All praises to Bernardine Evaristo for keeping it real.

POLAR VORTEX

SHANI MOOTOO

Book*hug Press

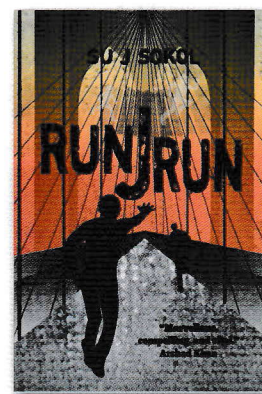
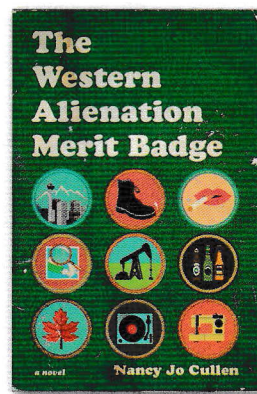
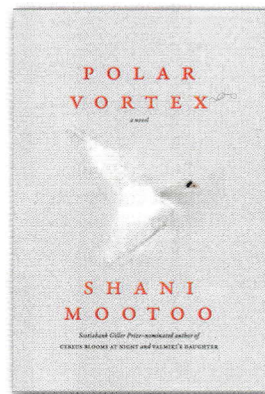
REVIEW BY MAYA KHANKHOJE

Polar Vortex is the story of smouldering love blown away by a polar vortex. It is also the retelling of the tired love triangle dilemma, this time brought to life by its very collapse and then reconfiguration.

In this highly original novel, we are introduced to Priya, a lesbian of Indian origin born in the Caribbean, her old friend Prakash, a man of Indian origin expelled from his birthplace in Uganda, and Alex, Priya’s current lover. Side characters include immigrants clinging to their traditions and Syrian refugees, mentioned tangentially but relevant to the plot.

The story takes place over the course of a weekend in the country, but several flashbacks take us to a distant past. Such is the power of festering wounds, unresolved conflicts, unstated desires, unfulfilled dreams. Desire, family expectations, cultural loyalties and a heart at odds with the mind make this a deep and multi-layered novel.

The beginning of the book is deceptively simple. It starts out with an erotic dream about a man by a dreamer who identifies as a lesbian. Then, mundane scenes between Priya and her lover are described while thoughts of Prakash, not seen or heard from for many years, keep intruding. There are also flashbacks to university life and two young immigrants discovering their sexuality and trying to figure out what is permitted at home and what is expected on campus. Here, the author deftly weaves sexual rites of



passage with attempts to forge new lives on alien soil. Most importantly, though, Mootoo delves into the deepest recesses of the human soul only to discover that when people lie to others it is because they are lying to themselves.

Shani Mootoo has done it again. She has proven that not only is she a consummate writer but that she is also a keen observer of the human psyche. She is also one of the most honest and self-aware writers that one can have the privilege of reading.

THE WESTERN ALIENATION MERIT BADGE

NANCY JO CULLEN

Wolsak and Wynn Publishers

REVIEW BY KERRY RYAN

If you were a Girl Guide in the 1980s, or in any decade, you will appreciate Nancy Jo Cullen’s *The Western Alienation Merit Badge* on aesthetics alone. Each of the novel’s short chapters is denoted with a badge icon and thematic title, such as First Aid, Junior Camper and Friend to Animals.

Appropriately, resilience and survival are important themes in the novel, which follows protagonist Frankie as she returns to Calgary after news of her beloved stepmother’s death. Frankie has cut short a freewheeling European adventure and left behind her girlfriend to come home to her conservative Alberta community and help her sister, Bernadette, care for their ailing father, Jimmy.

The dark clouds of alienation are inescapable in each of the story’s layers: the sisters chafe, Frankie’s coming out to her father is not well-received, and the entire province is on edge with the fallout

of the National Energy Program. The majority of the book takes place in 1982—the recession environment that set the stage for today’s “wexit” rhetoric—and government mistrust bubbles under every surface. The tension is ratcheted up even further by the presence of Robyn, a drifter and troublemaker with whom the sisters have a past.

Cullen, who has previously published a book of short stories and three poetry collections, makes some leaps with time that can be tricky to follow. While most of the book is set in a tight time frame, near the end it gallops forward three decades, then doubles back to 1974. It’s a bit jarring, especially when most of the chapters are only two or three pages, propelling the story in rapid bursts of action. But the shifts in time do serve a purpose. They present a three-dimensional model of Frankie’s family life and finally reveal the conflict that has dogged the sisters for years. The time shifts also serve to elucidate the power Robyn seems to hold over Frankie. A copy of *The Guide Handbook* threads together the time periods.

The Western Alienation Merit Badge earns its proficiency badges, as does Frankie: finding shelter from the storm, navigating difficult family terrain, and surviving the wilderness of loss. Be prepared for a good read.

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Renaissance Press

REVIEW BY URSULA PFLUG

I sometimes ask my creative writing students to switch up their P.O.V. characters and write them from different points of