

ON THE COAST / Welcome to British Columbia, 1992: It may be home to outlandish public figures, its heritage threatened, but at the same time its bounty and hardships inspire powerful verse

The Pez, the protector and the poet

THE PEZ
The Manic Life
of the Ultimate Promoter

BY JENNIFER WELLS

Macfarlane Walter & Ross,
277 pages, \$29.95

PAVING PARADISE
Is British Columbia Losing
Its Heritage?

BY MICHAEL KLUCKNER

Whitecap, 217 pages, \$22.95

PULP LOG

BY BARRY MCKINNON

Caillín, 72 pages, \$9.95

Review by
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our glitzy ruins. Poet Barry McKinnon, whose oddly titled *The Pez* was a Governor-General's Award nominee a decade ago, teaches college English in the northern B.C. pulp mill town of Prince George, and tensely broods in its scarred landscapes.

We don't pay much serious attention to poetry these days, and we have almost no way of talking about it (outside the jargon of specialized literary criticism), but *Pulp Log* reminds me that poetry remains a mode of writing in which unexpected insights collide in a way that no other usage of language permits.

In McKinnon's poems there's a lot of eating breakfast in the Sears cafeteria, afternoon brews in O'Flahertys, forlorn swims in the community pool (a kind of vain insurance against mortality), and simply being part of the pick-up truck traffic wending through the polluted haze that settles in the earthen bowl of Prince George. There are also kids and pets and pension plans (more vain insurance).

These very precise, mundane images, influenced by modernist master William Carlos Williams and the improvisational rhythms of jazz, play against a tough metaphysics. The humbly specific — "we buy Sears gloves, with leather palms, 99 cents — momentary bargain" — is set in the context of existence itself: "Oh it's infinity we're up against, the

sum of the self and all it carries in the dangerous meandering social world full of humans getting ahead at everyone else's cost. . . ."

Between "the rubble of another close-out sale, the dusty goods of Saveco, Crazy Willys — (sardines and note pads & slight thrill of the bargain, barely compensation for what's being lost" and the enigmatic, yet haunting "outside — beautifully clear — nature's bored mind — there is no mind but the human voice that sees its body," there is a sort of political middle distance.

In it, "mumbling old time loggers on George St. *know* / there is no wood, no viable wood, this is the message of thinned streets, drunks, young men (their northern costumes of despair: long hair, acid-jeans, logo hats, smoke, drink beer at Joe's Place . . ."

McKinnon's voice is tense, riff-like, terse, but not bleak. It celebrates that "Sunday in winter when the steaks sizzle perfectly and the beer is endless . . . men & women at the bare breast of a larger world, pledged / remembered." *Pulp Log* lives up to the epigraph from D.H. Lawrence that McKinnon sets at its beginning: "The cataclysm has happened, we are among the ruins, we start to build up new little habitats, to have new little hopes. . . . We've got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen."

The Pez may be on his last legs, the paving of paradise may be irreversible. But *Pulp Log* is likely to endure, even as the eponymous resource that fuels the town's economy disappears.

tween our mobile lifestyles and our natural West Coast environment," he notes, "is taking place in the suburbs of the rapidly developing regions of the province," and it is to this dismal sprawl that Kluckner devotes a good deal of his historical survey of design and heritage preservation issues in British Columbia.

Kluckner's prose is a bit dull and he tends to pull his punches — blaming our failure on the lack of the "individual's responsibilities to the larger community" more often than the power of capital. Nonetheless, *Paving Paradise* contains sufficient good, common sense that it deserves more than a regional audience.

The Pez is macabre fun, Kluckner is worthy, but the real nugget in this heap of B.C. books is Pulp Log, a 59-part prose poem about life among