



## Print Edition - Section Front



FICTION

## That perfect moment

MICHELLE BERRY

### Room Tone

By Gale Zoë Garnett

Quattro Books, 82 pages, \$16.95

The new press Quattro Books is determined to publish literature brought to Canada by immigrants or newcomers, books that will "break the taboos surrounding origin." The goal is to publish the kind of books that will reveal to us, and educate us in, the mixture of peoples that is Canada.

Their first in their novella series is *Room Tone*, by Toronto author Gale Zoë Garnett. Do not hesitate to purchase this wonderfully realized, beautiful book. *Room Tone* is much bigger than it looks. Garnett's intense and sophisticated, half-Scandinavian, half-Parisian narrator, Nica, grows up in Paris, skipping school to go to the movies. She grows up and joins "the family business" -- her mother is a famous actress, her father a cinematographer.

Nica becomes a well-known actor in Europe and then makes the leap to life in Hollywood: "People from other places," Nica says, "spend years in Hollywood. Many stay because each time they are definitely leaving, someone who is supposed to know

such things says that something amazing, brilliant and career-transforming is about to happen in the days, weeks or, maximum, months to follow."

Nica soon realizes that Hollywood isn't what she wants in life, so she returns to live both with her mother in Paris and her father in Stockholm, and to continue her European film career.

The reader follows Nica through her subtle and quiet adventures. She is a contemplative character, one who analyses life as she moves through it. A joy to be with, Nica has intensely real insight into people, acting and film life. Room Tone, Nica says, is "my favourite moment on any set. . . . At that moment, on the last day of filming, the sound director shouts, 'Quiet everyone. Quiet on the set. Complete silence please. Room Tone!' Upon hearing this cry, every human on the set becomes completely still, save for breathing. The sound of the room, the room's tone, is then recorded." Nica compares it to a "shared meditation," where all the problems of the world are displaced and everyone just listens to the sound of the room.

This is precisely what this novella is about: Room Tone. It is about taking time to breathe silently, to listen to everything and everyone. To stop. And think. The form of the novella -- the size of it -- works with this concept. Can a novel be thought of as a house? If so, then a novella is a room in that house. And this novella is the room tone, the moment Nica has stopped and is listening, the moment of meditation.

Quattro Books has chosen a winner. Garnett is a masterly writer. There are elements here of Milan Kundera and Gabriel García Márquez -- heady praise, I know -- something about Garnett's voice (or Nica's), the rhythm, reminds me of Sabina in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

And Garnett plays with emotions and sexuality as social constructs in the way Márquez does. I'm completely impressed. Garnett writes, "Room Tone is, for a moment or two, humans at our best. Quiet. Listening together to the sound of the room -- a sound of which each of us is a breathing part. Room Tone is perfect." I couldn't have said it better myself.

*Michelle Berry is the author of five books and several fully realized but half-written screenplays.*