

**THE GLOBE AND MAIL** 

Globe Unlimited: WEEKEND FLASH SALE!



And get unlimited access on all your devices

[See my options!](#)



## **The English Stories, by Cynthia Flood**

- **The English Stories**, by Cynthia Flood, Biblioasis, 224 pages, \$19.95

Reviewed by **Lynda Grace Philippsen**

Published Friday, Jun. 12, 2009 08:54AM EDT

Last updated Thursday, Aug. 23, 2012 11:24AM EDT

Vancouver writer Cynthia Flood, whose past novels and short stories have been distinguished with numerous awards including The Journey Prize, takes readers into the milieu of 1950s England in her latest collection, *The English Stories*.

Flood recreates the cultural, social, political and economic tenor of the era by examining the lives of various middle-class characters. Through linked narratives, she develops the thematic complexity of a novel but gives readers the satisfaction of short stories - the more dense and intense art form. And by using several voices to narrate the stories, she achieves greater depth than the single perspective of her principle child-narrator, Amanda Ellis, would allow.

Amanda, a plucky fifth-grade girl, is uprooted from her familiar Muskoka, Ont., surroundings to a residential hotel, The Green House, in Oxford. She attends St. Mildred's as a day girl. She boards during those times that her father, Gerald, on a fellowship to write a book on Keats and Shelley, and mother, Rachel, an editor, must travel for research.

No longer shielded by the WASP pretensions of her colonial Canada, Amanda discovers how the maps and the margins of her world have altered without "my own country spread solidly around me." In addition to coping with loneliness, bullying, and the sexual hazing of "dirty night," she can't come top in anything because the penmanship learned in Canada slants incorrectly, and marks evaporate from her exercises and tests. Assignments that deserve more are given less, because, Mr. Greene, instructor of Foreign Affairs (the only male at St. Mildred's other than Fitzgerald the factotum) explains, "She must learn shame."

English becomes a foreign language. People Hoover. Girls wear frocks and plimsolls. No one speaks the word toilet; they spend a penny and use the loo. Branches rhymes with launches. Amanda chafes "at the mockery at St. Mildred's for her lapses in English usage and accent. She would never learn the language, not entirely. Never."

For the knowledgeable reader looking back on the politics, prejudices and practices of the day, the stories are charged with dramatic irony. In this ultra-class-conscious world that meticulously sorts insiders from out, "One word can kill," says Mr. Greene, who is not only adept with languages, but also "Irish as Paddy's pig." However, he has "cracked the code and achieved a flawless accent," thereby passing for what he is not. He lets drop, "Miss Pringle and Miss Hodgson [the Head and Assistant Head] are irreproachably Home Counties, but Miss Lincoln's speech is too carefully not northern, while I suspect that Miss Flower's gentle voice overlies an origin involving coins, counter, and till."

Miss Pringle bemoans the ubiquitous materialism, lapsed moral standards and the lasting stringencies of a war that cost Britain its imperial status. Though she claims to welcome "the post-war trend of arrivals from other lands in the Commonwealth, as we are now to call it," her bigotry is obvious. "The ways of life followed by persons from the Caribbean ... cause social disruption. Naturally, there is nothing of this sort with Amanda, who is indistinguishable from her classmates, but."

Perhaps the most compelling of Flood's wonderfully imperfect characters, Pringle's charm is in her restraint. Hers is the only diary in the collection, and reading it is deliciously akin to snooping through things that were never meant to be known. She subtly reveals much - pride, prejudice, meticulous attention to detail and a stiff upper lip. However, telling exclamation marks that are as school-girlish as her charges (HRH!) and Victorian connotations of words also reveal her hidden passion and love.

In all, there is little to fault here without seeming petty. A minor incongruence: Flood creates a precocious, pre-pubescent narrator who, in some instances, is bewildered and insecure, in others poised, challenging authority with questions well beyond her tender years. Tellingly, in an interview with Laurie Smith in which she probed for which aspects of the stories might be based on "real people" in Flood's parallel childhood experience, Flood says, "The theological issues [Amanda raises] actually came up in Canada in my high school years." Exactly.

*The English Stories* consistently delight for their careful craft and thematic intricacy, but especially for their attention to language - the pleasure of logos. Word. Green House resident retired Professor McGeachie tells Amanda the Greek alphabet is the beginning of learning, "The

first step to Low Goes." In play-by-play fashion, 77-year-old twins Tilly and Milly battle to complete The Times Crossword each day. Amanda keeps lists: amaranth, ignoble, crystal, vicissitude.

As well, for the knowledgeable reader looking back on the politics, prejudices and practices of the day, the stories are charged with dramatic irony. Readers realize the disquieting truths the author reveals even though the characters are blind to a broader world-view and their own flaws. Still, the microcosm in which they operate is universal and representative, even today.

This is perfect summer reading. Without being light or trite it can be picked up and put down with ease, and the characters linger with the reader long after.

*Lynda Grace Philippsen is a freelance writer and contributor to A Verse Map of Vancouver.*

© 2013 The Globe and Mail Inc. All Rights Reserved.