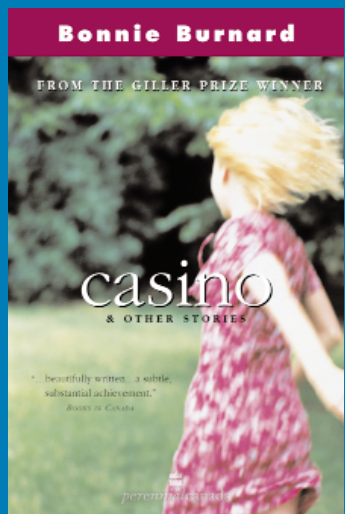


Casino and Other Stories

BONNIE BURNARD



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BIBLIOGRAPHY AND AWARDS

Casino & Other Stories

0-00-648548-0; \$17.95

HarperPerennia/Canada paperback edition/ A Phyllis
Bruce Book

A Good House

0-00-648526-X; \$19.95

HarperPerennia/Canada paperback edition/ A Phyllis
Bruce Book

AWARDS

A Good House won the Giller Prize in 1999.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Two major events influenced Bonnie Burnard's writing career. The first was living on the prairies, mainly in Regina, with her children and husband. Saskatchewan during the seventies was a haven for writers. It was home to a supportive writing community, the literary journal *Grain*, Canada's first provincial arts council, and a well-run public library. But with three children under the age of four, it was difficult for her to write at home. Burnard would travel to Fort San, a former sanatorium transformed into an artists' colony, a place that gave her both the space to write and a support community to draw upon. Having three children under the age of four at the time, it was difficult for her to write at home. She would write a story at Fort San and then take the draft home with her for revisions. Sometimes she would produce only one story in a summer.

The other major, although distant, influence was Marian Engel. During the late seventies, while auditing a creative writing class, Burnard attended a reading by Engel. She told described Marian Engel to Sandra Martin in *Quill and Quire* in 1999:

She was middle-aged, she didn't have on expensive, floaty clothes, she wasn't wearing a suede suit, she was just what she would have been at home... She just walked in and sat down and read—and the seriousness with which she listened to the questions, and tried to answer them.... She respected them.... I have never been an arty type, never been a woman who dressed like that, and I saw that Marian Engel had been able to do it as she was. She had not altered her essential self and I thought I had to do all the romantic arts stuff, the garret, all that nonsense. I wanted a middle-class life, I loved my husband, I loved my house.

In 1995, Bonnie Burnard was the recipient of the Marian Engel Award, given to honour a woman writer in mid-career.

Women of Influence, her first collection of short stories, won the Commonwealth Best First Book Award. *Casino and Other Stories*, her second collection, was shortlisted for the Giller Prize and was awarded the Saskatchewan Book of the

Year Award. *A Good House* won the prestigious Giller Prize in 1999 and has been published in at least thirteen other countries. Carol Shields, writing in the *Ottawa Citizen*, described *A Good House* as “the finest novel published in some years in our country. Its grace, its generosity, its humanity are present on each of its pages.” Phyllis Bruce, Burnard’s editor, commented that “her prose is highly polished... She worked on every sentence until it was perfect—her attention to detail is amazing but she is also understated in her presentation.”

Bonnie Burnard is a writer, a creative writing teacher and reviewer whose work has been widely anthologized and dramatized on CBC Radio. She has been a guest lecturer at writing and literary conferences in South Africa, Sweden, Germany, and England. Born in southwestern Ontario, she lived for many years in Regina and now lives in London, Ontario.

ABOUT BONNIE BURNARD’S WORK

Phyllis Bruce describes Bonnie Burnard’s writing style as “deceptively simple.” Underneath the surface simplicity of her understated writing lie “dark currents of feeling” and it’s this tension between the surface reality and the psychological depths of the characters’ lives that hooks the reader into the pages of her work. In *A Good House* and *Casino & Other Stories* we are pulled beneath the surface of convention into uncharted and often unpredictable emotional territory as Burnard uncovers the significance of the unspoken and the remarkable within the seemingly commonplace.

The complexity that lies within everyday life is revealed in *Casino & Other Stories*. In the short story “Crush,” the coming of age of a young woman undercuts the typical middle-class reaction to female sexuality. A young woman who has developed a crush on the bread man that she babysits for, greets him topless at the door of her mother’s house on a hot summer afternoon. The bread man’s reaction is fear, the mother’s is worry and shame, while the young woman defiantly claims her feelings of desire.

A Good House is centred on family, an aspect of all our lives that is often anything but ordinary. “Even now, with greater

distance and longer absences between family members, people usually find that they do belong in one kind of family or another. It’s what we’re born into, it’s sometimes what we work very hard to break away from, and often it’s the most complicated thing to leave when we die,” says Burnard about the role of family. In *A Good House*, we follow the lives of an extended family over several decades; as their relationships tighten and stretch, the concept of family is continually redefined.

The narrator in *A Good House* skips through time, periodically touching upon the lives of the characters from the fifties to the nineties, showing us what life has brought them. Like ours, the characters’ lives in *A Good House* take unexpected twists and turns. Murray marries the wrong woman, has an affair, and then unexpectedly finds love in middle age with another woman. Daphne never marries, and instead finds happiness as the mother of two daughters. Bonnie Burnard writes that “maybe happiness is a combination of two simple things: the instinct to celebrate like mad when your luck is holding and the tenacity, the decency to hold true (to family, to a lover, to friends) when luck goes bad.”

Tenacity is the glue that holds the Chambers’ clan together. As Burnard said about family life in the short Giller movie on *A Good House*, you want to get off the train but you can’t because other people are depending on you. Although the Chambers are all essentially good people, they can tell one another white lies, withhold information, and give in to jealousy and lust. They are, in other words, an ordinary family bonded by blood and inheritance.

Phyllis Bruce describes Bonnie Burnard’s exploration of the role of time in our lives as “a fascination with fate.” While we can look back on our lives and try to bring understanding to them, we don’t know what the future holds. The narrator in the story “Casino” details the characters’ lives in a few short paragraphs. Duncan, a teenager who imitates James Dean and slacks off in school, will become a lawyer, marry twice and have five kids. Donna, the woman he dated at the casino who pushed him to learn algebra, will have a hysterectomy at twenty-three and will marry no one. Jack is skinny, a hard worker, good company and friends with Duncan. He “believes in the future.” Tired of working harder than his

classmates, Jack will drop out of school and work joe-jobs until he becomes a manager at an arena in a nearby town. While in university, “he will meet his residence roommate’s cousin right before Christmas in his first year and start to date her, seriously.” She will tell him all the things he has always wanted to hear. They will marry and have kids, she will have a torrid affair that Jack will know nothing about, and Jack will remain skinny and not remember who he hung out with during his summers at Casino.

In an age of irony, it is both unusual and refreshing to read about characters who, despite their human foibles, face life’s tragedies with strength, tenacity, and humour. Bonnie Burnard writes, “Although I am as susceptible as anyone to cynicism, I now recognize skepticism as a much more useful response to my world. Perhaps these shifts have been prompted by middle age, by a life already more than half-lived; perhaps they are simply a way to make room in my thoughts for hope, which I find I do not want to live without.” Through the lives of Bonnie Burnard’s characters, we are seduced by the familiar, only to be surprised by the unexpected. From small-town Ontario to a hotel in Vancouver, we are given a fresh perspective on the everyday worlds that we inhabit.

AN INTERVIEW WITH BONNIE BURNARD

Q. When did you first realize that you wanted to write?

A. *I never thought about being a writer. I just thought about writing. I started when I was thirty-three just after my son was born.*

Q. What role did Fort San play in the beginning of your writing life?

A. *It was essential at the time. I met writers who were published. It’s the same as any profession. I learned where to submit material.*

It also gave me the time to write. I went for a week every summer. Sometimes I would just write one story a summer. I had

three children under the age of four. At home, I could revise my work but I couldn’t begin a new story.

Fort San was a peaceful and private place. I could go through the day and not talk to anyone if I didn’t want to. The meals were provided. I had nothing to worry about, everything was taken care of.

Q. Your characters and their lives are so real. Are they based upon actual people?

A. *No. They are entirely fictional. But their traits, habits, and appearances are drawn from real people, and they are recognized by people. Margaret in *A Good House* licks her fingers to shape her eyebrow. I’ve seen a woman do this. And Daphne shows off her legs because she has nice legs. I have seen countless women do this. So again, these details are drawn from real people.*

Q. Was the transition from writing short stories to writing a novel difficult?

A. *No, I was ready. I knew that I wanted to stay with the characters a lot longer and I felt comfortable about doing this. In the title story “Casino” there are four main characters and the story covers their distant futures. When I wrote that I knew that I was ready. I was interested in a longer life span and so I was in need of a novel. Also, I wanted a whole lot of people. It would be too crowded for a short story.*

Q. In *A Good House*, you span the lives of an extended family over several decades. When did you decide to structure the novel this way?

A. *I knew from the beginning. I was interested in how things have changed for families over the last fifty years. Families have made a lot of adjustments over the last fifty years. This change is an indication of strength. Families can be anything at all.*

In the fifties, the idea of family was much more defined. We were fooling ourselves culturally by defining the family so narrowly—defining it as two parents and 2.5 kids.

Before the fifties, families were far more expansive. Your uncle might be living in a room over the garage. And now families can be anything at all.

Q. Where did the story of *A Good House* come from? Did you know the characters and how their lives would unfold before you started writing it, or did their lives unfold and personalities develop as you were writing?

A. *The first scene that I wrote was the circus scene where Daphne falls and is hurt. The second scene was the discussion between Margaret, when she is in her eighties, and Patrick. The discussion has an undercurrent of tension. Before I wrote the scene, I heard the voice of an older woman and her middle-aged stepson and I knew that the father of the stepson was not as he had been. So I wrote this conversation. Then I realized that I had to fill in the previous forty years, to show what brought about this discussion.*

For a time I thought that this discussion would end the novel. But I wanted a party at the end, for everyone to be together at a party. There had been funerals in the novel. Celebrations and family gatherings are also a part of life. So I wanted it to end with a celebration.

Q. In *Casino & Other Stories* and *A Good House* there are many strong female characters, like the young woman in “Crush” who challenges the socially acceptable ideas of female sexuality. Is there anything in particular that drew you to this subject?

A. *Well, it's fascinating. The last few decades have brought about tremendous change. Now, everything is up for grabs because the power base has shifted. Daphne in *A Good House* represents, without meaning to be hurtful or bull-headed, this idea. She wants to question what's normal and she wants to make her own choices. But her motivation comes from personal needs and hopes. The politics of her choices and needs can be read from a distance.*

The characters' fates are connected with a changing world for women. Margaret represents what used to be the role for women. She has a practical marriage and it is a good thing for her, too.

Q. You mentioned the word fate. In both your short stories and in *A Good House*, the role of fate is explored. The characters start off rather hopeful and life brings along unexpected and often challenging surprises.

A. *Nobody gets to have a pristine life. Well, maybe for a time, like the first twenty years. I'm interested in how people manage with what life gives them. Usually, they are hurt or limited in some way. I'm interested in how people react to what life brings them.*

And I'm interested in strength. I'm not interested in weakness. Based on what I've witnessed, most people are strong. I've seen a lot more strength than weakness in most people.

CASINO & OTHER STORIES



Bonnie Burnard's second short story collection, *Casino & Other Stories*, offers nine finely polished and deceptively simple stories that reveal the extraordinary within the everyday. From the shores of Lake Huron to the prairies of western Canada, these stories touch upon the lives and relationships of ordinary people.

In the title story, the histories, personalities, and psychologies of the regular visitors of the town dance hall are deftly described within a few paragraphs. The narrator shifts through time, offering the histories of the regulars alongside the history and fate of the dancehall called Casino. While "Casino" spans fifty years or more, "Crush" illuminates the sexual awakening of a young woman in one hot summer afternoon. In "Deer Heart," a mother-daughter relationship is brought to light during a dark ride home through the bush from a day trip to a luncheon honouring the Queen. In "Breaking the Law," a single mother reflects on the male influences in her teenage son's life, including his Ontario uncles who are "grown-up, dependable, funny, complicated, sorrowful, good men" and possibly damaging influences, like the serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer whom Daniel reads about in the paper. Heather turns down the advances of her former lover Tom, a man concerned with love's relationship to beauty, in "Jiggle Flicks." And in "Nipple Man," a divorced man obsessed with women's nipples finds himself in love with a woman who doesn't have any.

Wry and intelligent, humane and touching, each of these stories seduces and then surprises us with a sense of the familiar finally understood and of passion recognized, as they heighten our awareness of the complexities and richness that lie within everyday life.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) Ten men, including a five-year-old boy, respond to a nude, slightly bruised woman chained to a bull in "Ten Men Respond to an Air-Brushed Photograph of a Nude Woman Chained to a Bull." Richard, a high school student, responds "...you start looking for rules about that kind of stuff, you've got to decide who gets to make the rules. And it won't be you and it won't be me. It'll be some loser with a Bible." Do you agree with Richard's anti-censorship views?
- 2) Are the responses of the ten men, including the five-year-old boy, to the photograph of the woman and the bull, given their personal histories, ages, and occupations, what you would have predicted?
- 3) In "Crush," a young woman acts out her desire for an older married man who delivers bread, by greeting him topless at the door. His response is fear and unwanted desire, her mother's response is shame and resignation, and her own response is confusion and defiance. What do you think of each of these responses?
- 4) The story "Casino" shifts from a description of the dance hall and the place it is located, to a description of the lives and the futures of the people who frequented it. Is there a place that is central to your life and/or community?
- 5) What was it about the drive home through the bush that opens up the channels of communication between the mother and the daughter in "Deer Heart"?
- 6) Crystal reflects on the possible male influences on her teenage son's life in "Breaking the Law." There are the serial killer and the boxer being charged with sexual assault that Daniel reads about in *The Globe and Mail*, as well as Daniel's Ontario uncles who are complicated yet good men. Do the many different ideas of what it is to be a man make coming of age difficult for contemporary young men?

- 7) In “Jiggle Flicks,” a man who is obsessed with the relationship between love and physical beauty moves from one relationship to the next. Considering that physical beauty is a commodity in our culture, is there a relationship between it and love?

