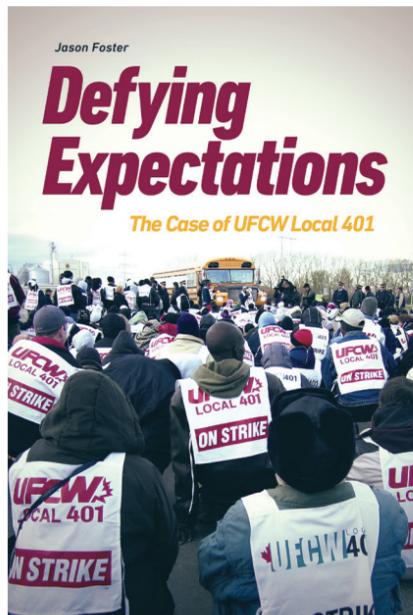


# BOOKSHELF

## Defying Expectations: The Case of UFCW Local 401

by Jason Foster  
ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY PRESS  
2018/\$34.95/220 PP.



record of Local 401's history and a broad theoretical view of how to make unions more effective today, this case study is immensely valuable to academics and the labour movement alike.

At the heart of *Defying Expectations* is an argument to consider unions in their messiness and totality, given their contradictory role of both working within and resisting capitalism. Foster suggests that if we drop pigeonholes such as "business unionism" or "social unionism," we can better understand unions' internal logic. For instance, Local 401's top-down leadership structure belies the image of a social justice union; it's had the same president since 1989 and lacks formal avenues for workers to voice dissent or join in decision-making. As Foster reveals, the union normalizes this state of affairs

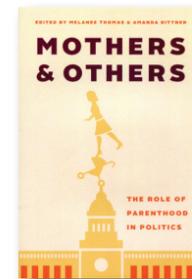
Studying a thriving labour union in Alberta is a bit like studying an organism that flourishes in scorching, sulfur-laden undersea vents. Until recently, Alberta's labour protections have been even flimsier than those of most US states. Its rate of unionization is the lowest in Canada. A prominent rural meatpacking plant used to dangle a banner boasting "Proudly Union-Free." Against these odds, one Alberta union has achieved remarkable wins over the past two decades, especially with organizing new immigrants, refugees, women and youth. United Food & Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 401 had a reputation for being a conservative business union, so—as Jason Foster explores in *Defying Expectations*—what accounts for this organization's unexpected success?

Foster's background as a professor at Athabasca University and a former staffer with the Alberta Federation of Labour informs how he tells the story of UFCW 401. He begins with a violent 2005 strike at the Lakeside beef-processing plant in Brooks. A wildcat protest by Sudanese workers triggered this job action, which ultimately won a first contract for over 2,000 employees. Drawing on extensive interviews, document analysis and first-hand observation, the first half of the book chronicles Local 401's improvised evolution from 1997 to 2017 as it becomes increasingly militant. In the second half, Foster critically analyzes the narratives and leadership context that help explain the union's "accidental" renewal. By offering a rich

by relaying a story about a tough, fatherly figure who acts swiftly in members' best interests. The book raises thorny questions about participatory democracy versus responding efficiently to capitalist forces. Further, it distinguishes between getting underserved workers to sign union cards and actually transforming the power structures that prop up whiteness and patriarchy.

Given the subject, I wish the book had dug into some of the exciting conversations among activists and academics today about how progressive social movements can be better attuned to the intersection of class politics and identity politics. To present a unified front, the labour movement has often downplayed the distinct ways that race, citizenship, disability and other markers of social difference shape workers' lives. Likewise, I would have welcomed details on how Local 401 successfully unionized migrant workers, who can be deported simply for exercising their rights. But what the book does offer is far more interesting and hopeful than a glorification of Local 401. *Defying Expectations* portrays an imperfect organization that, despite a harsh political climate, has brought concrete gains to low-wage workers and their families. Simultaneously, it underscores how the North American labour movement might connect with those who stand to benefit most from unionization by redistributing not just profits, but power.

—Anelyse Weiler is a doctoral candidate in sociology at the University of Toronto and a scholar with the Trudeau Foundation.



## Mothers and Others: The Role of Parenthood in Politics

Edited by Melanee Thomas  
and Amanda Bittner  
UBC PRESS  
2017/\$34.95/372 PP.

The median woman in Western democracies was for many years a married heterosexual mother. As a result, citizens tended to use family responsibility as a prism for evaluating political participation. Female candidates knocking on doors at dinnertime met such questions as "Who's making dinner for your husband? Did you leave the kids home alone?" Voters thus assumed mothers could be committed to their families or to politics but not both.

*Mothers and Others*, edited by political scientists Melanee Thomas and Amanda Bittner, underlines the varied impact of parenthood on political activity. We learn that having children makes minimal difference in the general population and, in some instances serves to elevate women's involvement. For example, mothers with children aged 5 to 12 are more active as civic volunteers than other women. By contrast, being a parent is significant to political careers. Female parliamentarians in Canada and elsewhere are more likely to be childless or to have older and fewer children than males. Even in a geographically small place such as the UK, women MPs find that demands from their constituencies, parties and the House of Commons make it hard to see their families in the evenings or on weekends. Rosie Campbell and Sarah Childs report in their chapter that rather than discussing how to alter political institutions to create a better work/life balance, commentators in Britain portray female legislators as less committed to public life than their male counterparts. Women parliamentarians thus end up condemned as defective political representatives.

The volume shows clear differences among political women, particularly between feminists and their critics. Ronnee Schreiber shows how anti-equality campaigners in the US present themselves as mothers and political professionals whose mission is to reduce the size of government and uphold social tradition. They are rugged individualists who believe, in the words of leading activist Phyllis Schlafly, "The homemaker isn't chained to the stove. She can do all sorts of things."

Consistent with the experiences of contemporary women premiers in Alberta and Ontario, data in this book demonstrate that threats of violence and acts of violence constitute serious problems for female politicians. Security problems extend to their families as well. To wit, women MPs in Canada avoid posting the names or photographs of their children, because of safety concerns. *Mothers and Others* is an important and pioneering volume. It forces readers to reconsider how to reform not just democratic institutions but also how we think about women in politics. The book deserves wide public attention.

—Sylvia Bashevkin is a professor at the University of Toronto.

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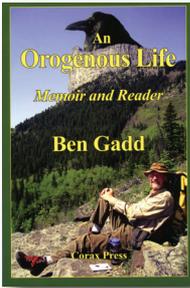
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A CORDIAL REVIEW

## An Orogenous Life: Memoir and Reader

by Ben Gadd  
CORAX PRESS  
2017/\$39.95/655 PP.

I don't like this book. But Alix, Bob, Cyndi, Warren, Yorath and Zimmer will—Ben mentions you.

"It's not a good idea to ask a friend to review a book," Ben said, handing me a copy, "but what do you think?"

I smiled. In this uxorious autobiography you can learn:

- Why the naturalist, who displays an excessive fondness for his wife, arrived with Cia at an interpretive gig at Robson Ranch with a dead bunny protruding from the front bumper.
- Which of the Ten Commandments are adhered to by these two atheists.
- Several ways not to die—see pages 205, 219, 261 and 291.
- How to build a device that propels incendiary projectiles.
- How an inheritance financed Ben's first self-published book.

Ben does not explain why he and Cia chose the "Corax" name for their Canmore-based publishing company. Take your pick of definitions: Raven. God of Nox. Demon of Darkness. The Hellraiser's Wishmaster. Lord of Death and Destruction.

At 1.2 kilos the book is Ben's heaviest if not longest. Luckily, it includes snappy sections of orogenous writing about mountain building. As part of the list of more than a dozen impressive books that bear his name—including the best-selling *Handbook of the Canadian Rockies*—the 655 pages in *An Orogenous Life* bring his published page count to well over 3,500. His published word count exceeds 1.5 million.

Ben suffers from—and seems to enjoy—polyglotism. Besides Canadian and American English, some Spanish, French and maybe some German, Ben also speaks Kidese (dictionary of "kid words" on pages 272–274), Raven (an avian dialect), Climber (a twisted tongue), Geology (an ancient lexicon), Politics (an opiate of the people) and numerous other tautologies.

Excerpts from the Bibliography of Ben that litter the book provide soliloquies—sometimes comic—to balance the narrative.

But some criticisms are necessary.

What happened to the editing? Cia was probably on holiday.

The title sucks! Like *Palimpsest* by Gore Vidal, it obfuscates, dissembles and contrives. How about: *Liked and Loathed by All the Right People: Ben Gadd*.

Do we need *all* these details? Then again, what *did* happen when Ben picked up the hitchhiker Chris McCandless—later of *Into The Wild* fame—on his way to Alaska?

Cheap shots aside, the detail in this memoir is fascinating, and Ben, we are pleased you lived long enough to write this book. May we all live long enough to read it! And the reason I don't like this book is because I love it.

—David Finch, a Calgary historian, is qualified to write this review as he's the only person in western Canada not mentioned in the text.



## Jesus on the Dashboard

by Lisa Murphy-Lamb  
STONEHOUSE PUBLISHING  
2017/\$19.95/300 PP.

Gemma, the teenage anti-heroine of Lisa Murphy-Lamb's debut novel, belongs in the pantheon of great YA protagonists. Part Holden Caulfield from *Catcher in the Rye*, part Margaret Simon from *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*—but mostly a wonderfully weird, jaded and vulnerable person in her own right—Gemma is both easy to empathize with and thoroughly entertaining. Abandoned by her mother, Angie, when she was 10, Gemma has forged a unique (and hilarious) relationship with her father, Nathaniel, but has no other friends. Anorexic, anti-social and apathetic, 17-year-old Gemma is taking life one day at a time. Then Angie's cousin Rachel Lane shows up and offers to reunite Gemma with her mother if she comes to stay with the Lanes over the summer.

Set in Calgary in 1984, *Jesus on the Dashboard* hits all the right notes of a coming-of-age story. Murphy-Lamb perfectly captures the banal drama of high-school students: drinking and skinny-dipping at the reservoir, spreading idle gossip and exchanging what they think is clever flirtation. The Lanes are a religious family, and Murphy-Lamb shows an outsider's perspective on the Christian faith—Gemma's skepticism and curiosity—without making a mockery of their beliefs. Unlike *Stranger Things* or Stephen King's *It*, which bask in '80s nostalgia and use pop-culture references as a storytelling crutch, *Jesus on the Dashboard* sprinkles recognizably '80s details throughout without getting in the way of the main character's story. And Gemma's character development throughout the novel—as she meets many different types of mothers and learns more about her own—feels organic and real.

Unfortunately, some of the things that make *Jesus on the Dashboard* feel so real are also the things that make it work less well as a novel. There are too many minor characters to keep track of who don't matter to Gemma's story, too many plots that at first seem significant but don't go anywhere. Gemma is confused and often so are we. Murphy-Lamb's decision to cut away from a climactic scene (where Gemma and her cousin Penelope confront Rachel and demand answers) in the middle of the action and jump ahead to the aftermath doesn't help with this confusion.

Despite these flaws, Gemma is such a compelling protagonist (and Murphy-Lamb writes her main character's voice so captivatingly) that following her journey to its conclusion proves very satisfying. Ultimately, reading *Jesus on the Dashboard* is like reading the real diary of a young woman—at times achingly sad, at times biting funny, at times confusing and messy, but always honest.

—Bruce Cinnamon is an Edmonton-based writer. ■