

BOOKS AND VISUAL ARTS

SECTION J

Religion J7

Science Matters J8

A for Atwood, B for Beaulieu

And C as in conversations. Authors Margaret Atwood and Victor-Lévy Beaulieu covered a lot of ground in a series of encounters in 1995, aired on French-language radio a year later. McClelland & Stewart has published a translated transcript of those chats, and it makes for fascinating reading, Bronwyn Chester writes. *Page J5*

ACTING BOOKS EDITOR: FRANK MACKEY 987-2486

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Basket case

A smart shopping cart narrates this funny, futuristic tale in which gamblers place bets they can't win

Scepticism Inc.

by Bo Fowler

Jonathan Cape, 248 pp, \$22.95

ELAINE SHATENSTEIN
Special to The Gazette

Scepticism Inc. is a simple tale – just a man, a woman and a supermarket shopping cart.

And not just any shopping cart either, but a shopping cart endowed with consciousness, thanks to the Infinity Chip (invented, by the way, on Aug. 16, 1998), which also provides it with information, near-faultless memory and the power of speech. Like other appliances of the time, it is also invested with a belief in God.

This sentient gizmo, the story's narrator, was created in November 2022 and, after a three-week training period (or childhood), sent to work at the Shopalot supermarket, right next door to St. Pancras Church in London. There Edgar Malroy is waging – or rather, wagering – an unholy struggle with organized religion through his betting business, Scepticism Inc. His challenge is straightforward: put your money where your metaphysics are.

And people do, in droves. Leaders of all the world's great belief systems (and also the minor ones) are only too willing to put down cash on their convictions, and so are their followers. Bets are laid that God exists, that God is good, that the origin of all motion in the universe is God. On any assertion that "cannot be proven true or false by the senses." "But how can anyone win?" asks the supermarket cart, reasonably enough. "They can't. No one ever wins. That's the point, that's the beauty of the system."

Malroy's right. He becomes very, very rich as a result of this existential gambling, and what he does with the money is only one of the inspired ironies of this first novel written by the young and exceptionally wry Bo Fowler.

With a degree in philosophy, Fowler is well-equipped to argue the fine points of reason vs. absolute truth; that he does so with such affectionate humour is highly original. Through Edgar Malroy, he takes on everything from the Catholic church – especially the Catholic church – to television, but his touch is light, his tone amused. The underlying mood is compassion, for

our fallibility and our desperate need for certainty. Edgar's personal credo is "Who knows?"

This humility is genuine, because Edgar himself is at the mercy of a profound internal flaw. While putting everything on the line to demonstrate "the absurdity of metaphysical utterances," Edgar nonetheless falls helplessly in love with Sophia Alderson, a woman who is both ridiculously beautiful and convinced she is a messenger from God. She believes salvation from hell requires that people not wear mismatched socks, eat with their fingers, look at naked animals, watch two videos in a row, read in bed, tell knock-knock jokes, use a microwave on Sunday, pick their noses, and so on. She claims to be very close friends with the Virgin Mother.

In other words, what Malroy would call a nut.

Just how nutty is she? One example: when she makes her second attempt on Edgar's life, she swears that "the Virgin Mother had been sending her detailed

instructions by flag from a council flat some two miles away."

But if you think that proves anything, try this: Edgar's devotion to her never wavers, despite all the trouble she causes him. Now if that isn't blind faith, then it's at least a case of "love is blind."

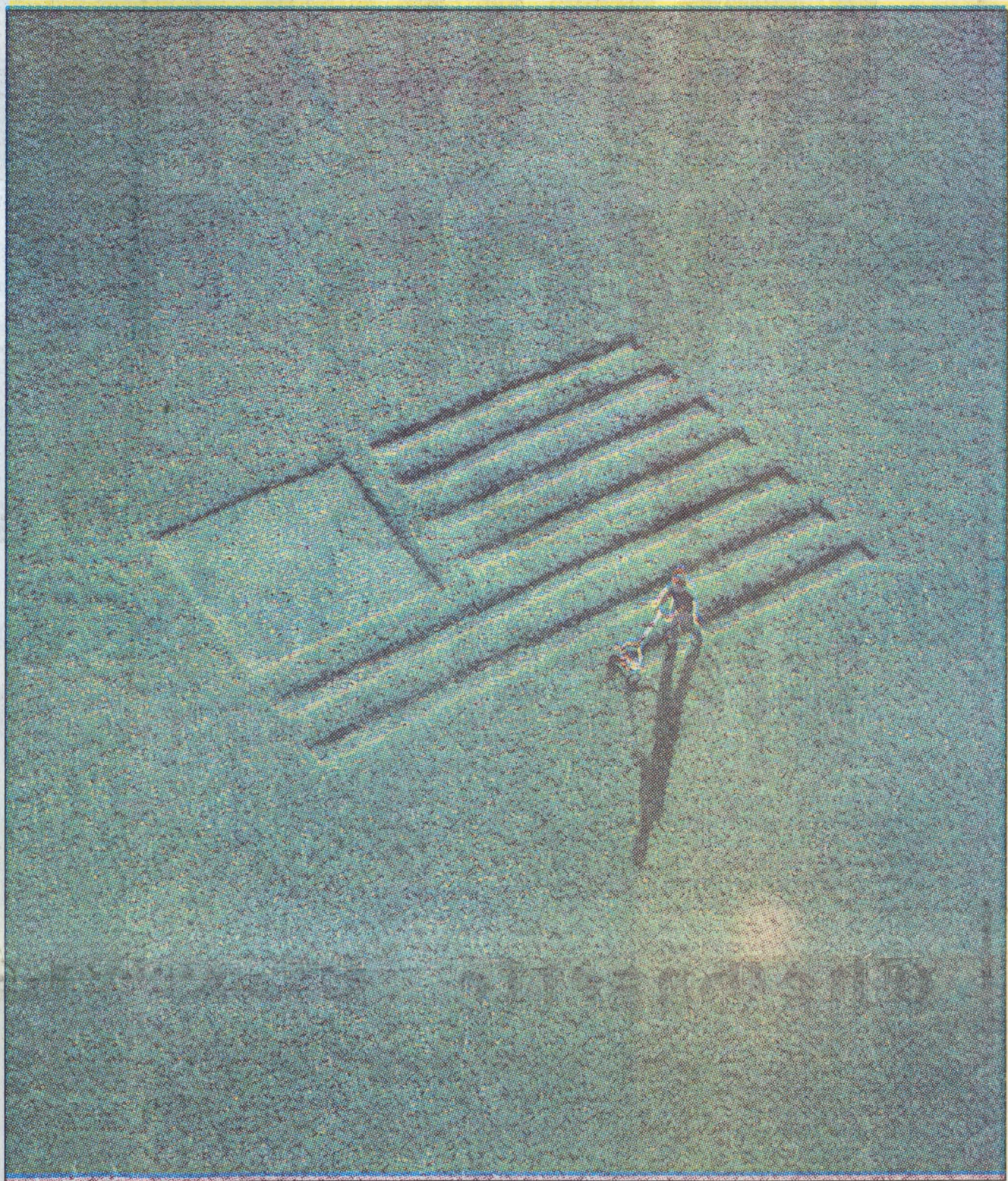
One such anecdote can in no way

convey the enormous, sustained comic energy of Scepticism Inc., an inventive work full of seriously funny ideas. The litany of bets Fowler comes up with is hilarious, and his spoofs on religious dogma, the commercialization of everything, including faith, and political infighting within various churches is satire at its best, all delivered in deadpan manner.

Style here is far less important than content, and this is probably just as well, because there is a strong tendency to declarative sentences, and even some basic writing errors (grammatical and syntactical) that are surprising, to say the least.

But these weaknesses are worth overlooking in a book so rich, so stimulating, so intelligently entertaining. Scepticism Inc. might offend true believers who have never been troubled by the shadow of a doubt – but who knows?

✦ Elaine Shatenstein is a word-trade worker.



100 Years of Keeping America Green, a photograph taken in 1994 by Kevin Foster, shows a man with a hand-powered mower cutting the outline of the Stars and Stripes in an Indianapolis lawn.

The patch where the mower is king

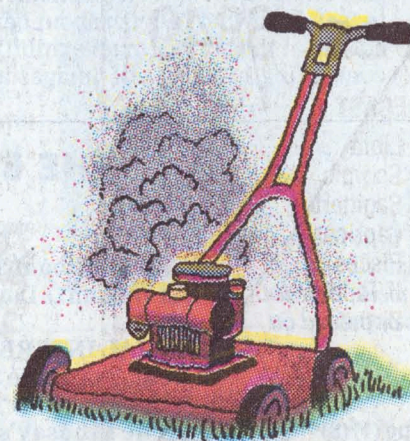
A CCA exhibition takes the lawn view of the U.S.

ANNMARIE ADAMS
and **HELEN DYER**
Special to the Gazette

What is more reassuring than the hum of a mower on a Sunday afternoon in suburbia? What more soothing than the aroma of the grass it cuts? What more mind-numbing than the rows of featureless patches of green stretching endlessly along a suburban street? As ubiquitous to the American lifestyle as fast food, the 32 million acres of cultivated lawns that reach across our continent are kept in trim by a \$25-billion-a-year lawn-care industry. A monument to the fastidiousness of the American public, the lawn has long since left its natural origins behind.

These are some of the reflections inspired by The American Lawn: Surface of Everyday Life, the fifth and final exhibition in the Canadian Centre for Architecture's blockbuster series, The American Century. Occupying the CCA's entire exhibition space, it features the lawn in its many incarnations: as a backdrop for family life from birth to death, as a play area, a show-and-tell space for corporate America, a conflict site and a location where, despite its seemingly benign appearance, anything might happen. A fitting conclusion to a series described by CCA chief curator Nicholas Olsberg as "an inquest on the 20th century."

Curated by a group of professors at Princeton University's School of Architecture and designed by New York architects Diller & Scofidio, the exhibition combines scholarly material on the lawn with good, plain fun. As befits



such a down-to-earth subject, many of the displays in the lawn show invite visitors to interact with, even touch, the material. There are film clips, Garden Club glass slides from the 1920s and '30s, how-to books, turf samples and, of course, lawn-mowers (rotating under auto-show lights). At once thought-provoking and whimsical, the exhibition also asks us to look at the sinister side of lawn ownership, to examine evidence of our relentless quest for the perfect turf grass, and to consider the lawn as a symbol of order and civic pride.

Diller & Scofidio's design is unabashed and high-powered. Each room is inspired by a different aspect of the lawn and, in fact, each could stand alone as an "installation." The over-all look is tough and exposed. Black wires drape shamelessly from the ceiling. Kodak projectors are mounted right on the walls; display cases are post-industrial chic; in several spots, mirrors of

fer us a second look.

One particularly intriguing gallery is dedicated to the lawn as battlefield. Texts from court cases brought against violators of local lawn-care regulations are projected onto the floor. Along the walls are stereoscopic photographs by Robert Sansone, illustrating the lawn as territory and as a breeding ground for turf wars. Here visitors are encouraged to adjust their stereoscopes to a comfortable height through a rather ingenious design detail using wires and pulleys, perhaps a subtle reference to the backyard clothesline.

Throughout the exhibition visitors are expected to step and stoop in unexpected and stimulating ways. At the entrance to the six rooms of the main galleries is a projected video of grass, simulating a welcome mat (and it's OK to step on it). Infra-red aerial transparencies from the U.S. Geological Survey sit like so many squares of sod just inside the first room. Other highlights from the exhibition include a glass table constructed with pairs of cleated sports shoes, tiny televisions suspended from the ceiling playing clips of scenes of the White House lawn and Washington's Mall, and a giant movie screen showing excerpts of the darker side of lawn life in films such as Blue Velvet. The inclusion of exposed cables, massing models, so much celluloid, and even pink plastic is refreshing in the sombre galleries of the CCA, and for this reason, the exhibition will undoubtedly appeal to a broad audience.

Please see **LAWN**, Page J2

ART



Something about horizons

Shomei Yo's work has the sparseness of a haiku, the minimalism of a rock garden. Besides seascapes, the exhibition of his work at the Centre International d'Art Contemporain also features work he did on the book Not Mines, But Flowers. *Page J6*