



## Who Was Doris Hedges? The Search for Canada's First Literary Agent

by Robert Lecker, Kingston and Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020, 288 pp., CAN \$37.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-2280-0369-4

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## ARCS ROUNDTABLE



In this issue, we commence an occasional exercise we are calling the *ARCS* Roundtable. It features a recently published book that three scholars in the field have read and reviewed, along with a short rejoinder from the book's author in response. The exercise is hardly new; other scholarly journals in the humanities and social sciences featured it from time to time and with good success. The roundtable mimics, as much as the printed page can, the sorts of discussions that we have, enjoy, and benefit from at in-person scholarly conferences such as our own biennial meeting of the Association for Canadian Studies in the United States. It allows for all readers, specialists and non-specialists, to engage deeply with a single debate on one Canadian Studies subject. We are confident that the collegial and vigorous exchange that we print below will act as an instructive model for future *ARCS* roundtables that focus on important books in the field of Canadian Studies. *ACH* and *BP*

**Who Was Doris Hedges? The Search for Canada's First Literary Agent**, by Robert Lecker, Kingston and Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020, 288 pp., CAN \$37.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-2280-0369-4

### Cold Case: Doris Hedges

*Review by Kait Pinder, Acadia University, [kaitpinder@acadiu.ca](mailto:kaitpinder@acadiu.ca)*

Robert Lecker's *Who Was Doris Hedges?* pursues a mystery most scholars of Canadian culture will not know remains unsolved. In fact, very few readers are likely to have heard Hedges's name or to know that she was the first literary agent in the country and the author of a handful of poetry collections, novels, and short stories. While Hedges's erasure from literary history has been almost perfect, Lecker follows the traces of her public record. He trails her through Montreal and the middle decades of the twentieth century, investigating clues in her letters and creative works, constructing timelines of international travel and upper-crust events, and recreating the scenes of Hedges's life with the passionate focus of a noir detective. Like any good detective story, this book is as much about Lecker's fascination with his elusive subject as it is about her. Channeling some of the sensationalism and spiritualism of Hedges's novels, Lecker seeks to commune with her ghost and occupy her perspective, "to understand Montreal and Canadian writing through her eyes" (14). While readers learn much of Hedges and her Montreal, however, Lecker is frequently thwarted in his attempts to know more of the private woman than her public records reveal: she left no children, no personal papers, no private archive (6). The trail at times turns cold.

Detectives have long been the pulpy familiars (or perhaps the ego-ideals) of literary scholars. In an important re-evaluation of the tropes that shape literary criticism, Rita Felski (2015) analyzes the ubiquitous analogy between detection and critique that informs suspicious styles of reading in literary studies. While it may seem like common sense that scholars view the details of the texts they examine as clues to their larger cultural significance, the analogy between reading and detection also presupposes a crime, and a criminal. In Felski's words, "like the detective, the critical reader is intent on tracking down a guilty party" (86). In

the mysterious story of Doris Hedges, what has been the crime? Who has been the criminal? In the most obvious sense, it seems Hedges herself. Lecker's investigation is inspired by his suspicion of Hedges' signature style of self-promotion. A wealthy woman, Hedges had the confidence to present her flailing agency as an unquestionable success in her correspondence with men whose attention for her own writing she hoped to gain. In a letter to William Arthur Deacon, the editor of the *The Globe and Mail's* book reviews section, she requested a meeting with him while she was in Toronto seeing "publishers, editors, and our 85 clients from your fair city!" (quoted in Lecker 2020, 5). Such hyperbolic descriptions of the agency's success trigger Lecker's distrust: "There was a *deceptive*, self-promoting side of Hedges that intrigued me" (5; emphasis added); "early in the *investigation* I began to wonder about Hedges's *motives* and her modes of self-representation" (7; emphasis added). A detective is working the case.

Lecker's investigative approach is not a point of criticism, although the book does not foreground all of its (gendered) implications. The scholar-as-detective trope makes for the kind of gripping read that is virtually unheard of in academic books. And Lecker is at his best when his historical research and materialist approach disprove Hedges's claims about herself with hard evidence, or its striking absence. In these moments, Lecker transports us in time to Hedges's Montreal, bringing readers into the spaces where she lived and worked with extraordinary detail. Following up on Hedges's incredible claim, in April 1948, that her agency had "already handled some 2,000 manuscripts sent by approximately 1,000 clients" (121), Lecker reconstructs the office space of the agency, housed in room 333 of the Dominion Square Building in downtown Montreal. Comparing the space Hedges would need to handle such business to the dimensions of the office in the original blueprints, Lecker persuasively and humorously underlines the extent of her exaggerations: "we can calculate that the office of Hedges and Southam was approximately 350 square feet without any furnishings. If we subtract the square footage of space taken by, say, two desks at 20 square feet each, we are down to 310 square feet. Then we need to deduct the space taken by the many filing cabinets required to organize the two thousand manuscripts . . ." (122). The evidence is damning: "The bottom line is that Hedges claims to have been handling two thousand manuscripts by one thousand authors out of an office that barely had enough open floor space for two people to move between desks. It sounds impossible. It was" (122).

Elsewhere, the escapist fantasies of Hedges's fiction are undermined by reading her work in its immediate context. "Masquerade," published in *Canadian Home Journal* appears, like Hedges, out of touch with the reality of its readers. While the narrative centers on a wealthy widow who finds passionate love during a trip to Europe, Lecker situates the story on the pages of the magazine, which are full of ads selling not escapist romances, but solutions to the unglamorous maintenance of the body. Again, Lecker's humor charms as he lists the advertisements for Mum's Deodorant, Dr. Scholl's callus treatment, Lavoris mouthwash and gargle, chocolates for weight loss, and "a free book on rectal and colonic disorders" among others (189). Here and throughout the book, Lecker positions Hedges as both cunning in her self-representation and beguilingly out of touch with the contexts of her writing and the changes going on in the literature and politics of her time.

Despite Lecker's persuasive unveiling of Hedges's misleading claims about herself, one cannot help but admire her confident self-presentation. Anyone who has suffered from imposter syndrome will envy Hedges's unabashed and unironic correspondence with the literary men of her time, which included accounts not only of her agency's success, but also of the large checks she received for her publications in the United States—an

impossibility (84)—and her celebrity in Montreal—an exaggeration. For example, in correspondence with Lorne Pierce, who published two chapbooks by Hedges in the Ryerson Chapbook series, she writes of having “received a great deal of fan mail” (89). As Lecker argues throughout the book, Hedges’s exaggerations of her success offered her a strategy for “establish[ing] herself in an English Canadian literary marketplace and a literary culture that was dominated by men” (5). Given the gendered obstacles in Hedges’s path, one must admire how thoroughly she committed to faking it until she made it, although she never quite pulled off that important second part.

If Hedges’s strategy of faking it suggests she understood that the business side of publishing was crucial to an author’s success in the mid-century, her own literary works, as well as her politics, are notably out of keeping with her time. Lecker’s analyses of Hedges’s chapbooks, novels, and short stories continually reveal that she was uninterested in experimenting with the modernist and modern-realist aesthetics of her contemporaries, and at times her comments on Canadian writing imply that she was not aware of the modern-realist movement establishing itself in the country. Similarly, while Hedges addressed contemporary social issues in her essays and radio broadcasts, her position on topics such as youth delinquency tend to reflect the privileges of her class more than her engagement with the social problems of her time: “[b]oth in her writing and in her social sphere,” Lecker asserts, “Hedges seemed to be caught in a time warp” (211–212). On these topics, Lecker’s detective persona flashes his street cred and class consciousness, often juxtaposing Hedges’s privilege against influential social and artistic movements of the 1950s and 60s.

So, no matter how remarkable her self-promotion, Hedges’s politics and privileged class standing temper any enthusiasm about uncovering a forgotten feminist underdog in these pages. A member of the established Dawes family, Hedges lived most of her adult life in the Ritz, and later moved to a prestigious address on Redpath Place. Lecker’s suspicion of Hedges’s class privilege rightly colors her self-promoting character; however, I wonder where Hedges fits among other women writers of middle-brow and sensational fiction. That is, Lecker’s terms of analysis often replicate the assumptions of the modernist male critics who have preceded him and who he implies are at least partially to blame for Hedges’s erasure from literary history (4). It is clear that Hedges was uninterested in experimenting with literary modernism, that her political values were conservative, and that her art does not compare to the Beatles (223). It is less clear whether she had contemporaries in other circles, for example among the other women who published short stories in magazines such as *Canadian Home Journal* or among the women studied in Peggy Lynn Kelly and Carole Gerson’s *Hearing More Voices: English-Canadian Women in Print and on the Air* (2020), women who, like Hedges, had careers both in print and on the radio.

Felski concludes her analysis of the detective-scholar analogy by arguing that suspicion is often “infused with moments of enchantment” and “not so very far removed from love” (113). The same can be said of Lecker’s attitude toward Hedges in this book. Because so little is known of her private life, Lecker often allows himself to speculate about what her poetry and novels may reveal about her desires, and even her sexual activity. While some connection between authors’ lives and their writing is expected in a literary biography, critics usually attempt to avoid the biographical fallacy of imagining works of literature as windows into authors’ private desires. Although Lecker reminds readers of the biographical fallacy, the pleasures of speculating on Hedges’s sexual desires prove too tempting for this noir detective. Many of the analyses of her literary works blush with erotic suggestion, now of a possible affair

(97, 217), now of an unhappy marriage (195), now of generalized sexual repression (153). These fascinations on Lecker's part are understandable, if also shot through with unexamined gendered implications: after all, the detective's pleasure in uncovering the truth is not that different than the lover's pleasure in undressing their beloved, or the voyeur's thrill in gazing at something private. In the noir genre that inflects Lecker's narrative, the detective and the lover are often one and the same, and the femme fatale they pursue is both criminal and temptress.

Although the speculation over Hedges's sexual desires at times overshadows the discussion of her writing, the analyses are strongest when Lecker situates Hedges's work in the trends of the period. Here, Hedges's early poetry and involvement with the Canadian Authors Association offer an interesting counter-narrative to the dominant critical understanding of Canadian literature in this period, which has emphasized the interventions of modernist authors above all others. Additionally, late in the book Lecker positions Hedges's novel *Elixir* (1954), which includes a lesbian relationship, within the popularity of lesbian narratives in the 1950s. While Lecker's speculations about Hedges's own desires contribute to the impression that her *literary* achievements are slight, his contextualizing of the novel within the "Lavender Scare" of the 1950s and his reading of Hedges's habitual representation of heterosexual sex as "sex by assault" (167) open up her work for further study. Furthermore, given the fact that Hedges seems both cannily aware of the workings of the publishing industry and uncannily out of touch with the avant-garde movements of her time, I am curious about whose writing she read and admired. But perhaps an image of Hedges as a reader is just another temptation for speculation, another projection of desires onto a figure who remains a mystery.

*Who Was Doris Hedges?* attempts to track down the elusive woman who was Canada's first literary agent. Combining a great deal of historical and archival research with close readings of Hedges's literary works, detective Lecker pieces together a shadowy portrait of an otherwise forgotten literary woman of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Although the private woman continues to evade the scholar's suspicious gaze, Lecker's reconstruction of her public record is an important reminder of the variety of figures who contributed to the literary landscape in Canada in the mid-century. While Hedges's presence in literary histories may have been erased because her agency failed and her own literary works did not fit within the modernist movements that have been favored by critics, her reappearance on these pages is a welcome contribution to the on-going re-evaluation of early and mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century Canadian literary history.

## Doris Hedges and Alternative Realities in Postwar Montreal

*Review by Patrick Coleman, University of California, Los Angeles, [coleman@humnet.ucla.edu](mailto:coleman@humnet.ucla.edu)*

Robert Lecker's *Who Was Doris Hedges?* Reflects a growing interest among biographers in the lives of the mediating figures—editors, publishers, teachers, activists—who help create the infrastructure without which culture cannot thrive. In Canada, Sandra Djwa's life of Roy Daniells (2002) and Elaine Kalman Naves' portrait of Robert Weaver (2007) illustrate the genre. Lecker himself may be counted among these mediators, since as co-founder of ECW Press, editor of several monograph series, and more recently literary agent, he has played a key role in the institutional consolidation of Canadian literary studies. He was thus well-equipped to write about Doris Hedges, a Montreal woman of letters who founded Canada's first professional literary agency in 1946. By that date, Hedges had several years' experience as a radio broadcaster and public speaker during the war. Yet, like her poetry and fiction, Hedges's professional activities have left little trace in the historical record, and so Lecker's

biography takes the form of a quest story. The quest, first of all, was to retrieve the surviving documentation of her career: a fairly substantial amount of business correspondence and press advertisements, it turns out, but only a few scattered reviews of her books and nothing about her relationships with husband, friends, or possible lovers. It then became an interpretive quest when Lecker discovered that although the wealthy Hedges enjoyed a secure position in the anglophone Montreal establishment of her day, the image of herself and her work that Hedges projected in her writings seemed disconnected in two important ways from the real-life circumstances that would normally explain, if not necessarily support, the whys and wherefores of that projection.

The first problem involves Hedges's activity in the book world. The agency Hedges established with great fanfare shortly after the end of World War II, memorialized in partnership contracts, advertised in the press, and officially headquartered in a well-known downtown office building, did not, it turns out, conduct any actual business. As Lecker shows, its activity was limited to Hedges making exaggerated claims for her influence with publishing contacts, and abortive attempts to turn those claims into reality. The other arises from Hedges's creative work. The sympathetic depiction of lesbian and even incestuous desires in her poems and novels seems difficult to reconcile with the conventional moralism of the author's public statements. Such a discrepancy may be less unusual than Lecker thinks, but he is rightly puzzled by the absence of any anxiety in Hedges's correspondence or promotional statements about how her texts might be read or damagingly misconstrued. Nor does Hedges worry about the public's acceptance of her use of fantastic or speculative fiction plot devices. In what follows, I will suggest that if we extend Lecker's search for explanatory contexts to include the francophone city as well as a wider range of Montreal's postwar literature, these two instances of disregard for—or should we say dissociation from?—social or cultural circumstances may reflect the alienated reality of the compartmentalized, semi-colonial Montreal of her time.

As Lecker shows, Doris Hedges was deluded about what a literary agent could accomplish. The Canadian book market was small, and the country's English-language publishers served primarily as distributors for London and New York firms. When authors such as Hugh MacLennan sought an agent, they looked for one abroad. Hedges's other big idea was to partner with the Bradley Agency, founded in Paris after World War I by an American couple in order to help American expatriates of the interwar years get published in France, while also, and more lucratively, matching French authors with American publishers, notably Knopf. By virtue of her position in bilingual Montreal, Hedges apparently believed she could become a similar sort of broker between France, French Canada, and English North America. Lecker details the various reasons why the latter project, based as it was on a misunderstanding of book industry protocols as well as on the economic conditions of the immediate postwar years, was doomed to fail. I will only add one suggestion to his expert account. There may be a reason why her partner John Hoare, the owner of Burton's, the leading English Montreal bookstore, thought that as a bookseller he could negotiate local publication rights (Lecker 2020, 101–102). In the francophone Quebec of the period, the bookselling firm Beauchemin (a wholesaler, but I believe Hoare also acted [or would later act] as one), sometimes acted as a publisher as well (see Michon 2004; S. Marcotte 2005).

As for the former project, Lecker found no record of any contact between Hedges's partner Jacques de Merian and local francophone publishers. Merian may not have tried very hard, but in any case French-language publishing in the late 1940s was in a parlous state. As Lecker notes, when trade with France was cut off by the Nazi occupation, international copyright

restrictions were loosened, making it legal as well as practically possible for Canadian publishers to print and market French books, not just domestically, but to francophone readers in the United States and even Latin America. I would add that it was this economic boom that fostered the establishment of a number of new and forward-looking publishing houses in Montreal, notably Gérard Dagenais' Éditions Pascal, which brought out Gabrielle Roy's *Bonheur d'occasion* in 1945. The boom, however, was short-lived. By the end of the decade, most of these new houses, including Éditions Pascal, had collapsed. Lecker offers fascinating statistics about the international paper shortage of those years, but a more crucial, and certainly more demoralizing, factor was the end of the wartime dispensation. Liberated France was quick to adopt protectionist measures to support its publishing industry. These measures were supported by the French Left on ideological grounds: it accused Quebec publishers of printing books by French writers sympathetic to the Vichy regime, and then after the war by authors critical of communism (G. Marcotte 1989).

The conflict was complicated by bitter resentment on the part of Quebec authors and publishers, led by Robert Charbonneau, over a related issue: France's reluctance to view French-Canadian writing not simply as an offshoot of mother country but as an autonomous literature. The ensuing polemics mark a watershed in Quebec literary history, but less well known is that for Charbonneau that autonomy included the right to make independent choices about which French writers to publish in Canada and even to sell back to France if they didn't have a publisher there. Here again, ideology mixed with commerce, though as Gilles Marcotte points out, in ways that the parties to the quarrel did not clearly acknowledge or disentangle.

One may wonder what Hedges might have known about the francophone publishing situation, but the possibility that she knew something cannot entirely be discounted. She had enough contact with the French-language press during the last year of the war to get the liberal newspaper *Le Jour* to publish a translation of a little short story she wrote as contribution to the war effort (Hedges 1945).<sup>1</sup> Whatever the case, the point I wish to make is that like Hedges, Charbonneau failed to grasp, or acknowledge, the realities of the international publishing industry and entertained exaggerated ideas about what he could accomplish. For, given the economic realities of the local market, not to mention the power of the Catholic Church over educational and cultural institutions, how plausible was it for Charbonneau to think Montreal francophone publishers had either the economic capacity or the ideological elbow room to take advantage of the opportunities he imagined?

The other perplexing question about Hedges's engagement with cultural reality arises from her creative work. Hedges's fondness for fantastic or science-fiction plot devices seems hard to explain, given her social location, but one could argue that her inclination is in fact a sign of the increasingly threatened status of the Anglo-Montreal elite to which she belonged, undermined by the postwar shift of economic power to Toronto, challenged by an increasingly assertive French-Canadian majority in Quebec, clinging to its long-held prestige yet living off diminished cultural capital. In such a context, writers might well turn away from realism and project their contradictions and compensatory fantasies into gothic or other speculative modes. It has been argued that this was what happened among English Ascendancy writers in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Ireland. Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), Sheridan Le Fanu's ghost tales, and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) illustrate a trend that lived on into the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the uncanny stories of Elizabeth Bowen. Yeats' interest in theosophy (echoed by Hedges) also falls within the

category of what R. F. Foster called “Protestant magic” (1989). The validity of Foster’s thesis has been much debated, but it offers, I think, a fruitful starting-point for further reflection, not only on Hedges’s fiction, but on such later Anglo-Montreal works as Hugh MacLennan’s *Voices in Time* (1980), which develops the mythic outlook of *The Return of the Sphinx* (1967) into a vision of an apocalyptic future (see also Leith 1989-90).

A different kind of genre fiction may provide an interesting analog for another curious feature of Hedges’s work: it is remarkably open, if only partially open-minded, to lesbian and other transgressive desires, notably incestuous impulses. Such frankness is not what one would expect from a woman of Hedges’s social profile. Yet this sexual “knowingness” is just as abstract in its way as the fantastic premises of her plots. The passages cited in Lecker’s book exhibit a brittle sophistication rather than a fully incarnated worldview. Here, too, one can point to literary analogs in the Anglo-Montreal fiction of Hedges’s time: the hardboiled detective fictions of the 1950s and 1960s. *Hot Freeze* (1954), to take just one example, written by the British-Canadian Douglas Sanderson, displays a knowingness, and ambivalence, about transgressive sexuality that bears comparison with Hedges’s.<sup>2</sup> Of course, there are important differences as well, but if, as Lecker’s investigation invites us to do, we view “Doris Hedges” less as a consistent personal identity than as the name for a piece in a cultural jigsaw puzzle, then, especially in the absence of more biographical data, a reading strategy based on wider discursive patterns may be the most productive way to contextualize her work.

I will conclude by suggesting another connection to Montreal’s francophone imaginary, one that relates to both the institutional and the creative sides of Hedges’s career. In a classic study of the Quebec novel, André Belleau (1980) points to something very odd in the debut novel of Claire Martin, *Doux-amer* (1960). A writer of bourgeois background born in 1914, Martin, like Hedges, was active in Montreal radio broadcasting during the war years, a career cut short by her marriage in 1945. She moved to Ottawa and turned to fiction, and later to autobiographical writing. *Doux-amer* centers on the troubles of a woman writer and her editor/publisher, who is also the novel’s narrator. Though written in realist mode, the story presents a picture of Montreal literary life totally at odds with 1950s realities. Martin’s heroine lives comfortably off royalties from bestselling works of serious literature, just as her publisher conducts his thriving commercial business in fancy restaurants and nightspots. As Belleau writes, it is all “as if” (131), a happy fantasy of the way things should be. Martin’s account expresses, in a more romantic and of course avowedly fictional mode, the dreams of Montreal’s francophone writing community (or at least its liberal, “modernizing” wing) in the postwar years, just as it does Doris Hedges’s belief in those same years that she could create a literary agency out of thin air.

In suggesting these cross-cultural and cross-genre connections, I have taken to heart what I think is a key lesson of Lecker’s book. Our understanding of older cultural imaginaries relies on leaps of our own imagination to bridge the gaps in the historical record. *Who Was Doris Hedges?* encourages readers to make such leaps, though only as an inspiration to look further into the neglected or forgotten documents of a literary history that is richer and odder than we might think.



## A Study in Obscurity

*Review by Claire Battershill, University of Toronto, [claire.battershill@utoronto.ca](mailto:claire.battershill@utoronto.ca)*

The obscure sleep on the walls, slouching against each other as if they were too drowsy to stand upright. Their backs are flaking off; their titles often vanished. Why disturb their sleep?—

Virginia Woolf, “The Lives of the Obscure” (1925).

In biographical writing and research, fame usually wins the day. Biographies of queens, kings, actors, and famous authors are the ones that tend to be published and the ones that tend to sell. Why read a full-length and carefully researched account of the minutiae of a life if not to learn something about how exceptional figures turn out that way? Robert Lecker shows us precisely why in *Who Was Doris Hedges?*, because people who have not achieved posthumous fame can offer a different and perhaps even more immersive entry into the past. Obscurity seems to offer the potential for narrative edifices with a greater-than-usual number of windows and doors that can be opened not only onto the life of a single individual but onto a whole cultural moment, a whole organization, or a whole profession. Here, the details of Doris Hedges’s career as a literary agent, her attempts at becoming a poet, her theatrical engagements, and her charitable causes offer insight into the lively cultural world of Montreal in the early and middle parts of the 20th century.

This focus on uncovering an individual identity is the central question and the energizing force of *Who Was Doris Hedges?* Lecker’s interrogative title seems to be exactly of the kind that interested Woolf, who was in fact preoccupied by the “obscure” for the human details and good stories that could be uncovered in such Lives. It’s easy to see why Hedges would be an interesting subject: on the back cover blurb for one of her books, meeting her was described as “an exhilarating experience” (8). To know who Doris Hedges actually was, in any meaningful way, to know more than the bare facts of her life, though even those seem to have been difficult enough to uncover. The appeal of researching obscure figures comes, too, with its own set of circuitous paths and diversions, and Lecker recounts his travels through the archives in a genial style: in one early moment when very little was yet clear to Lecker about Hedges’s career (before he had even seen a photograph of her) one of his research assistants delightedly piped up with a suggestion: “I have a theory! Doris Hedges was a spy!” (7). She wasn’t, really, but these sparks of imagination and delight are sometimes what the best acts of historical investigative research can do. They can offer the potential to develop and refine hypotheses. I’m reminded of a neuroscientist I met at an interdisciplinary faculty event who once asked me how it was possible to ask new questions about old history. Well, this is how. There is a lot we still just don’t know about the past, particularly if we want to know not only what a person did, but who, as Lecker asks, they actually were.

Recovery work is also just as much about storytelling as it is about research, and Lecker is a lively and engaging narrator. Some of the most enjoyable moments in the book are the ones in which he narrates his own experience of researching (including the moving Coda in which he visits her grave). He balances his own speculations, close readings, and contextual asides with a significant emphasis on Hedges’s own voice (in the book and also on the associated website that includes a recording of Hedges speaking on the radio and

in which her particular cultural position is audible in the registers of her voice). Hedges's poetic voice is present in the text, too. Lecker quotes her poetry in full quite often in order to give a sense of her style. The poems are often about love and you read in them the party animal she seemed perhaps to be, even in a poem called "Apathy," which seems incredibly Canadian in its meditation on the perpetual sensation of waiting constantly for spring. In it, Hedges uses a repeated imperative construction to exhort readers to dance: "Let us dance, let us drink, let us spend/Of our vital, impassioned,/Our never-returning and exquisite loving/On shadows." Despite some metrically pleasing and charismatic lines like these, Hedges was not a renowned poet, even in her day. Lecker quotes some damning reviews of her work (she had, according to one reviewer, "little to say, and [said] it with an unoriginality that is numbing." Ouch.) In her study of posthumous literary fame, *Those Who Write for Immortality*, romanticist and book historian H. J. Jackson distinguishes throughout between "renown," meaning present fame, and "reputation," (2015, 2) meaning posthumous fame. As a poet, Hedges had neither. Perhaps this was because her work was not considered particularly original, but as Lecker points out there might well have been another reason: the entrenched divide between "literary modernism in Canada" and the more commercial and conventional side of textual production represented by the Canadian Authors Association and its affiliated journal, *Canadian Poetry*. The bias against poetry with more Victorian sensibilities was also gendered. As Carole Gerson points out, there was an exclusionary tactic justified by esthetic categories which "explicitly barred most of Canada's women writers from serious academic consideration" (1998, 35). Lecker offers an intervention on the matter of Hedges's limited poetic career with the contention that "We cannot understand success unless we understand failure" (5).

Esthetic failure didn't necessarily imply failure of other sorts, though: an exceptionally privileged person, Hedges had a wealthy childhood and young adulthood that included boarding school in Paris and extravagant fashions, parties, and travels. Remarking on Hedges's residential address at the time of her death, Lecker asks: "who actually *lived* at the Ritz? Quite a few people, it turns out . . ." (8). Hedges engaged in philanthropy and her politics were far from conservative. However, she did not forego any of the luxuries associated with her inherited wealth: "How would she reconcile [socialist writers'] arguments and aesthetics with the values surrounding her every time she attended the Junior League meetings, which were always held at the Ritz, or when she picked up the League magazine, with its advertisements for fine jewellery, expensive travel, and luxury furs?" (41). Lecker offers no answer but puts forward the contradiction and hypocrisy. Hedges married Geoffrey Paget Hedges (of the Benson and Hedges tobacco firm) and in her extensive travels had brushes with fame: she met Gertrude Stein and Isadora Duncan. Early in the book, there is one particularly beautiful description by Hedges of her experience of dancing with Nijinsky at a party: "We moved across the room in a spell of tango, our feet moving in unison and our bodies swaying. The record stopped" (19). Hedges danced with fame and with now-recognizable characters (this brings the book into conversation with similar stories of the famous-adjacent, like the documentary *20 Feet From Stardom* or the recent French TV series, *Call My Agent*) and although Lecker narrates these encounters, he always keeps Hedges's story at center stage.

There is a complexity about situating work like this in scholarly discourse since it crosses a number of disciplinary lines: this book will be of interest to Canadianists (both historians and literary scholars) as well as those interested in the international

interdisciplinary field of book history. Lecker also shows the contemporary interest among Hedges and her peers in the development of literary sociologies of their moment: in an editorial in *Canadian Author* that Lecker attributes to Pelham Edgar, the editor describes the work of the CAA as akin to the work of the book historian: “one of our constant and most difficult tasks is concerned with the relations between author and publisher or editor” (quoted in Lecker 2020, 28). Those relations, too, are ones that Hedges herself was constantly negotiating in her role as an agent. Hedges’s associations with the various domestic cultural organizations in Canada also highlight local organizations and values within a long-standing structural situation in Canada where domestic publishing is often supplanted by New York or London agencies and publishers. Existing studies of literary agents (which are few in any case, most notably Mary Ann Gillies’ *The Professional Literary Agent in Britain, 1880–1920* [2007]) tend to focus on larger organizations outside of Canada. *Who Was Doris Hedges?* made me think, though, as I did when reading Helen Southworth’s wonderful *Fresca—A Life in the Making* (2017), a similar biographical quest narrative, that perhaps we need a new field of “obscurity studies,” to allow us room to think in all the ways that Lecker does so beautifully about what it is *not* to be famous.

Lecker moves deftly throughout the story between Hedges’ own life and the contexts and institutions of which she was part, illuminating the structures and societies of the book world as he uncovers her own story. Those somnolent “Lives” that Woolf described require a particularly curious reader and a particularly curious author to activate the vivid stories prospectively hidden among lesser-known folks: “one likes,” Woolf writes, “romantically to feel oneself a deliverer advancing with lights across the waste of years to the rescue of some stranded ghost.” This is the pleasure of historical recovery work: the “old secrets” that “well up to their lips,” as Woolf suggests, offering insights that carry us, in the case of Doris Hedges, through a formative moment in English-Canadian settler literary culture.

## Doris Hedges and the Biographical Voice

*Response by Robert Lecker, McGill University, [robertlecker@mcgill.ca](mailto:robertlecker@mcgill.ca)*

Let me begin this response by thanking Professors Kait Pinder, Patrick Coleman, and Claire Battershill for their insightful comments on my book. The opportunity to engage in this kind of roundtable exchange is a rare privilege. I am indebted to Professor Andrew Holman for facilitating its publication.

In a recent review of *Who Was Doris Hedges?* in the *Literary Review of Canada*, Charlotte Gray concludes that my central subject is “neither important nor interesting” because Doris Hedges never achieved success or affirmation as a writer (Gray 2021). She also argues that Hedges cannot be called Canada’s first literary agent because her firm “never did any deals.” This response embodies precisely the kind of canonical values I was trying to write against: the idea that only what has been deemed “important” or “interesting” (by whom?) is worthy of cultural currency; that one’s career self-identification is dependent solely on financial success, as if a writer who never signs a book contract is therefore not a writer. Tell that to all the literary agents in history who have chosen to represent writers who never ultimately signed a book deal. Tell it to all the writers who are seeking literary agents today, precisely because they want a book deal. They may not ultimately sign a publishing contract, but they are still writers. One idea that intrigued me in pursuing the story of Doris Hedges emerged from the realization that

I could uncover and narrate the story of a writer and a literary agent who was not widely known and is not remembered. And the more I wanted to tell this story, the more I identified with the person Doris Hedges failed to be.

I suppose my attraction to Hedges's story did involve me in one version of what Claire Battershill calls "obscurity studies," which address the question of what it means "not to be famous," or (in the case of Doris Hedges) what it means to fail as a member of a family widely known for its business acumen and elevated social rank. But at the same time, there were elements of Hedges's life that made her provocatively almost-knowable to me. She lived in my city, not far from where I live now. She delivered lectures and performed on stage in the Arts Building at McGill University, where I teach. She resided for a while at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, where I once got married. When I ride my bike in Lachine, I pass the old Black Horse Ale Brewery building that was once run by Hedges's family. My grandparents are buried in the same cemetery as Doris. I can walk to her grave from theirs. So the more I learned about Doris, the more present her ghost became.

The slippage I note in calling my subject both "Hedges" and "Doris" accounts for an identity split that energized me in writing this book. I was always pulled in two directions. "Hedges" would be the subject of an academic inquiry into Canadian and Quebec history, publishing, and the cultural contexts of postwar Montreal. By finding out more about Hedges I could also explore what Battershill calls "the development of literary sociologies of their moment" and the process of "illuminating the structures and societies of the book world" as they existed in the years when Canadian literature was coming of age. But I could also try to find "Doris," the woman beneath her stiff public persona—the woman who wrote sexually charged poems, danced with Nijinsky in Paris, or imagined transgressive characters in novels that depicted lewdness and lust while at the same time exploring theosophy through the voice of a reincarnated pet dog who is a lurid, sex-charged, whiskey-loving voyeur. "Hedges" revealed herself slowly through uncovered manuscripts, stray notes, public addresses. "Doris" emerged through her lies and her insistent fakery, or in her physical presence through a growing gallery of photographs that showed her as a young woman caught in the light streaming through a window, or smiling mysteriously under her self-portrait in middle age, or looking both determined and regretful in a photo taken four years before her death. When I read the list of home items that were auctioned off by her estate, the physical evidence of a life lived came pouring in. These were the two sides of Doris/Hedges. I kept thinking about what the narrator of Michael Ondaatje's *Coming through Slaughter* says about his aim in trying to capture the double-sidedness of Buddy Bolden: "Did not want to pose in your accent but think in your brain and body" (1976, 134). Perhaps I could see the city and the literary world of Hedges's split ethos at least partially through her eyes. I wanted to create a sense of what that ethos might have felt like at the time, when short stories were routinely published next to advertisements for hemorrhoid remedies or when celebrity was measured in terms of a writer's ability to win the "literary Olympics," as Doris did, in 1948. She was the champion. Where is her gold medal now?

Kait Pinder has certainly picked up on the sense of scholarly desire that informed my quest. Or as she puts it, quoting Rita Felski, my inquiry was indeed "infused with moments of enchantment" that was "not so very far removed from love." Perhaps this is because, as Pinder says, "the detective and the lover are often one and the same, and the femme fatale they pursue is both criminal and temptress." In my attempt to find Hedges through standard research methods, I also became aware that there were other avenues available to me as

I tried to piece together the fragments that were left of her life. If what I eventually produced is a critical account that could also be described as a “quest story” (Coleman) or as a “biographical quest narrative” (Battershill), then I must also see myself as a kind of archetypal figure within that quest. Like most archetypal quests, the journey I experienced became a narrative about myself, an interrogation of the kind of voice I would permit myself in an account of this kind, a question about what liberties I could take in searching for my subject. To what extent could I know her? To what extent could I confess to the sense of desire I felt by entering and voicing the story of a woman I would never meet? Finally, I allowed myself to become involved in an inquiry that was, as Battershill notes, “as much about storytelling as it is about research.” I wanted to create myself as Hedges’s perfect interlocutor. What did that stance mean in terms of my overall inquiry? Carla Kaplan observes that “the desire to prove oneself the text’s ideal listener, may also be a desire to be the text’s ideal lover, a blurring of the line between the erotics and the heroics of the critical enterprise” (1996, 17).

But to what extent was I actually “voicing” Hedges’s story as a form of my conversation with her? Kaplan discusses how this kind of “discursive interrelation” can be called “an erotics of talk” (4) in which, as Roland Barthes argues in *The Pleasure of the Text*, “the text *desires me*” (1975, 6). As Kaplan observes, this expression of narrative desire “may provide an outlet for a female erotics that is otherwise repressed, but it may also lead to identification with narrators or authors which cannot be borne out, which are based on false assumptions or unrealistic hopes” (1996, 13). Kaplan writes that “an erotics of talk might be understood as wish fulfillment fantasy: a desire to be reassured that exchange between people is still possible, that we are not merely alone” (15). This erotics of talk is what Kaplan describes as “a figure for the representation both of desire and what thwarts desire. It is a performative that questions the status of performativity itself” (15). Quoting Iris Marion Young (2011), Kaplan argues that an erotics of talk is “a figuration for both personal desire and social critique, ‘a mode of discourse which projects normative possibilities unrealized but felt in a particular given social reality,’ a political allegory” (15).

While I would certainly not describe *Who Was Doris Hedges?* as a form of feminist critique, Kaplan’s discussion of narration as a discursive exchange based on the performance of desire provides a fundamental challenge to received notions of history and biography. When we allow ourselves to enter the imaginary life of our subjects, we also partake in a creative risk that affects the kind of histories we tell and how we tell them. Or, as Coleman puts it: “Our understanding of older cultural imaginaries relies on leaps of our own imagination to bridge the gaps in the historical record.” This kind of imaginative extension necessarily modifies our reading of the texts associated with biographical subjects. While the biographer who reads a poem as an expression of the private life of its creator might well be engaged in the “biographical fallacy,” is it not equally true that all biography is a fallacy because it involves the process of creating and recreating a life from our own particular perspective? The “biographical fallacy” goes hand-in-hand with the fallacy of biography. After all, the biographer’s life is nothing more than the narrative account he or she creates. I am a story. How can there be final rules for the way one reads a text in terms of its author’s life when that life and work are mediated through our own subjectivity? There can be no authenticity in biographical or interpretive acts. Doris was faking it, and so am I.

While it is true that one of my aims in writing this book was to bridge gaps in the historical record, I was also in some ways addressing a more personal historical record, for as Coleman

notes, my career includes extensive work as a publisher, editor, and literary agent. In this sense, my identification with Hedges's failed and faked career as a literary agent forced me to reflect upon my own experiences in that profession. In my early years as a literature professor, I would often downplay or hide my double life as a publisher and (later) as an agent. I was acting in response to my sense that publishing or agenting was not a creditable part of academic life. Somehow, English professors taught works of literature that existed in a vacuum that was completely removed from any consideration of the material conditions of production that had brought those works into the classroom or created the "classics" that were required reading for anyone who wanted to obtain the hierarchical status associated with canonical cachet. But then, when the canon wars developed in the 1970s and 80s, and as more and more diverse texts were brought into the classroom, it became acceptable to talk about the conflicting range of institutional forces that account for literary production. I found that in this respect, my students did not know the facts of life—by which I mean literary life. They did not know how books were conceived, how they were born, and how their existence was defined and then nurtured by a range of people involved in the publishing industry, including publishers, editors, agents, designers, publicists, booksellers, bankers, truckers, postal workers, and even weather forecasters. Books were the product of multiple factors that all came together to create this literary artifact we asked our students to read and interpret, without informing them in any way about the forces that accounted for its presence. For this reason, one of my aims in *Who Was Doris Hedges?* was, quoting Battershill, to focus on "illuminating the structures and societies of the book world" and, as Coleman says, to bring us into contact with "the lives of mediating figures—editors, publishers, teachers, activists—who help create the infrastructure without which culture cannot thrive." I also wanted to discuss "book industry protocols" as well as "the economic conditions of the immediate postwar years" to show how government "dispensation" affected publishing in both English and French Canada and responded to material conditions that still exist today: Canadian publishing cannot survive without government assistance.

When Doris Hedges started her literary agency in 1947, there was no government support for the book industry. How would she survive as a writer and as a woman in the book business? Perhaps Patrick Coleman is right in saying that her ideas about herself, her community, and her writing were fed by a form of "Protestant magic" that reacted to the threat of "diminished cultural capital" that seemed coterminous with the end of war. The magic may not have worked. In many ways, Doris did fail. But is it productive to insist that we only follow the stories of those who succeeded to the exclusion of those who failed alongside them? As Hedges's work shows, failure can be fascinating if you only give it a chance.

## Notes

1. Intrigued by this rare French item in Hedges's bibliography (242), I asked Robert Lecker about it, and he kindly sent me a copy. Unfortunately, because of a typo the year of publication is mistakenly given as 1943. This story deserves an analysis I do not have space for here.
2. This and other works in the genre have been recently reprinted by Véhicule Press, in the Rocochet series edited by Brian Busby.

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