

## Donovan's Paint Cans

BY MARC GLASSMAN

**C**anadian film must be in better shape than many of us realize. Not only does our government finance films that win awards at festivals throughout the world, but our film culture has become mature enough to spawn its first-ever satirical novel. *Paint Cans* is the title of Halifax filmmaker Paul Donovan's (*Buried on Sunday*, *George's Island*, *Squamish Five*) debut book. It is also the title of the film within the book, which becomes the subject of intense political infighting at Telefilm Canada. Donovan scrutinizes the whole process of making films in this country with an appropriately jaundiced eye.

His protagonist, Robert Wickwire (Wick) Burns, a leading executive at Telefilm, is in the throes of a mid-life crisis as the novel begins. He's broken up with his long-standing girlfriend and his abrasive father, Maitland, has shattered Burns' hip scene at his Harbourfront condo. Maitland continually derides Wick for what he perceives to be a morally indefensible position, that of a dispenser of millions of dollars of public money for films that he despises.

Wick's life is further disturbed by the sudden reappearance of Vittorio

Musso, a former filmmaking pal from his days at Ryerson who turns to Burns for financial aid for a "meta-film project" entitled *Paint Cans*. The script, which Wick and everyone at Telefilm perceives to be a loser, is a recounting of life and methods of a serial killer. Producer Neville Lewis, a commercial schlockmeister, backs it just to demonstrate the point that Telefilm would rather issue grants to an elitist art film than fund mainstream projects that could possibly make a return on their investment.

Through a series of complex machinations, Burns is able to stymie *Paint Cans* until he has a change of heart when a potential love interest praises the revised script. The narrative then twists and turns through a series of rather macabre calculations until it reaches an appropriately cynical conclusion.

Donovan's novel is a new one for Canadian audiences, a "roman à klieg," as Sid Adilman referred to it in the *Toronto Star*. Film insiders should be amused by the resemblances of some of the principals in the novel to apparently real people in the local industry. Donovan shows cunning in his ability to render Wick Burns' manipulations as he



shepherds the film project through Telefilm. The limitations and powers of a civil servant are wittily evoked. Burns' Jesuitical reasoning is precisely conveyed throughout the opening half of the novel.

Regrettably, *Paint Cans* falls apart in the latter third of the book. The satire is abandoned for melodrama. Suddenly, the reader is asked to remake the comic, fallible Burns into a potentially murderous and tragic figure. Although Donovan's wiser side prevails in an ironic dénouement, the earlier abrupt shift of tone has already harmed the overall satirical atmosphere of the novel. Although one could wish for a steadier and lighter hand throughout the proceedings, *Paint Cans* still works well as an insider's look at the Canadian film industry. **+**

*Marc Glassman is a Toronto writer, broadcaster, film programmer for the John Spotton Cinema, and proprietor of Pages.*

**PAINT CANS** — by Paul Donovan. New Star Books, Vancouver, B.C., pb, \$14.95.

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