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Review: York, Sarah Kathryn. *The Anatomy of Edouard Beupré: A Story*. Regina: Coteau Books, 2012. ISBN: 978-1-55050-477-4

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A quick internet search for Edouard Beupré (aka the Willow Bunch Giant) will give you a plethora of hits. You can view both family and promotional photographs, study x-rays of his joints, watch a short NFB film or read details about the life of this man, whose claim to fame is that he was the tallest man in Canadian history and one of the tallest men in the world.

You will find most of these same details in Sarah York's recently published *The Anatomy of Edouard Beupré*; however, this author's work of creative non-fiction offers much more than the extant facts of this relatively-unknown-famous-Canadian's life.

In a series of short vignettes, York presents the story of a person whose body did not stop growing. When he died at the age of 24, he was 8 feet and 4 inches tall. Hence the source of Edouard Beupré's fame; the reason for his space in biographies of famous Canadians; the reason why he is written about and the reason we might read about him. Edouard Beupré's life becomes a topic of interest because his anomalous body is an object of wonder, curiosity, fascination, derision. Bodies that obviously exceed the limits of prescribed normalcy are yesterday's freaks and today's medical cases; their images displayed in medical textbooks rather than on carnival posters.

Disability Studies scholarship (such as that of Rosemarie Garland Thomson, Robert Bogdan, Rachel Adams) examines the phenomenon of carnival "freakery", exploring the social construction of spectacle, contexts of ableism, colonialism, sexism, and the like, as well as the complexities of exploitation and resistance. Human difference transmogrifies into monstrosity

through social relationships/practices involving greed, power, and fear. Giants are made, not born.

Although Edouard Beaupré was extraordinarily tall, the role of giant was imposed on him.

The danger of writing and reading about Edouard Beaupré is that we may reinforce and/or perpetuate his reification as a freak, and the ubiquitous exploitation of difference. Happily, York navigates these risky waters with skill and awareness, ultimately, if narrowly, avoiding the lure of moulding her subject into the familiar and comfortable stereotypes of pathetic victim or a version of supercrip, inspiring the non-giant “normates” (a term coined by Rosemarie Garland Thomson, 1997) with his gentleness. York frames Edouard Beaupré’s narrative within that of the narrator, a medical scientist, who seeks to unravel the mystery of the “giant’s” pathology. In this framing, the narrator’s self-questioning of his personal obsession with Edouard Beaupré provides a matrix of scrutiny to the chronicled events of Edouard’s life, which is intensified still further by Edouard’s own introspections, as imagined by York. York undermines the classic metaphoric exploitation of anomaly in literature through the doctor’s gradual understanding of his motives.

York’s narrative reveals the human being that animated the transgressive physical size that marked Edouard Beaupré’s life and his body after death. She succeeds not simply by attempting to reveal his emotions and thoughts, but specifically by providing his context of family and marginalized ethnicity. The reader gets to know a boy and a young man who lives within a family’s emotional ambivalence—that is no doubt familiar to most of us: guilt, fear,

longing, enduring love, regret, and disappointment infuse the relationships composing Edouard's prairie community, ever struggling with poverty and loss. We are compelled to relate to Edouard as a fellow human being. This humanity, juxtaposed with the indignity inflicted on Edouard's body, in life and death, illuminates the social construction of Edouard's role of freak. His decision to travel as a circus sideshow generates from his desire to support his family as well as to win his father's approval. His limited options are constricted further by others' failure to appreciate his abilities for practical work and his fierce love and attachment to his community. Instead, he encounters embarrassment or disapproval. When Uncle Johnny invites the 16 year old Edouard to take him on, in no way does the uncle celebrate Edouard's strength: "'How sad it is to be outdone by a child,'" he said" (34). Away from home, as the object of incessant stares, Edouard is forced to confine himself to the stifling environment of the circus, where people pay in order to gawk. Edouard's felt financial responsibility to his family, his gentleness and trust, make him a target for exploitation by corrupt circus agents and drive him to abuse his own strength and health. His early, intensely pathetic death provokes weary outrage in this reader, since his loneliness, despair, and untreated illness were preventable, if difference was not construed as defect.

As readers, we join in the narrator's first-person account, initially perpetuating the reification of Edouard's mummified remains, but gradually discovering his personhood. Together with the narrator we can question our part in the making of a giant, or the making of otherness. "I too had fallen into the fantasy of the giant, the dazzling darkness of his form. I did not see a family man, or a terrified boy, an unburied brother, or a roaming soul. Perhaps I had also used him to my own ends. . . I wondered how many people had used him to ease their fears of dying. To profit. To believe in miracles. To laugh off human difference" (199).

The narrator calls himself a painter, instead of the invasive photographer his friend suggests he is. Like the author herself, the “painter” imagines and creates for others to interpret (25). At this time, the narrator identifies Edouard’s “wound of his life, his condition, [w]as freshly cut each time it began to heal” (29), allowing for an ambiguous diagnosis: is Edouard’s physical condition the problem, or is people’s response to him the problem? York opens the question of societal “disabling” by portraying Edouard’s subjective moments as grief-filled because he is lonely. Edouard sees his imprint in the dirt as “the ghost of a great man” (49). Edouard cannot live fully within his own stature, ironically, because others will not accept him as he is. His own people are repulsed by his anomalous height, his simple difference. Edouard is puzzled by his “condition”: “He turned the word around in his mind, though he did not know what it meant. *Giant.*”(68).

York’s frequent referral to “ghostly” images contributes to her tale’s haunting quality that intensifies the obfuscation of fact, fiction, social construction, physical experience, time and lives lived, spectacle and spectator. Consequently, the book’s melancholy remained with me long after its reading. I suspect that this effect may bring readers to further contemplate social responses to ostensible physical difference. York’s portrayal of Edouard’s subjectivity subtly undermines binaries of body and mind; Edouard’s pain and unhappiness, ultimately, are caused by his isolation, not by his size.

Brilliantly, this brooding atmosphere of ambiguity is encased in a tiny book, 4.5x6 inches, which in itself compels thought: why so small? Aside from providing a quick read, its physical size may defamiliarize the very process of reading a book of “normal” proportions; holding the volume may vaguely irritate the holder whose hands may feel too big. The tiny book conveys a story about a large individual. Its 206 pages echo the number of bones in a body—but

significantly, the pages encompass more than the story of Edouard together with his narrator.

The pages include Acknowledgments and photographic citations, thus having revealed the writing process, encompassing the author and her readers. We are all part of Edouard Beaupré's narrative.

In the Afterword, beyond the narrator's voice, we learn that after over 80 years of public display, his cremated remains returned to Willow Bunch with a memorial that brought together over 300 family members in "a celebratory reunion" (202). The information in the final pages offers a closure to Edouard's abuse, while affirming his membership in a family and community that struggled to reclaim him and properly bury him, despite the passage of years.